Golden Hour

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/44792095.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter
Additional Tags:	Angst, Hurt/Comfort, Fluff, Humor, Bittersweet, Post-Episode: s03e13 The Wrath of the Lamb, Post-Fall (Hannibal), On the Run, Caretaking, Injury Recovery, Near Death Experiences, CPR, Eventual Happy Ending, Established Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, no smut but lots of intimacy, First Kiss, Memory Palace, Hurt Hannibal Lecter, Hurt Will Graham, Vulnerable Hannibal Lecter, Vulnerable Will Graham, Caring Will Graham, Caring Hannibal Lecter, Sassy Will Graham, Fisherman Will Graham, Will loses time but gets it back, Canon-Typical Violence, implied suicidal thoughts, Road Trips, Hiking, Camping, BAMF Will Graham, BAMF Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal Lecter is a Little Shit, Non-Sexual Intimacy, Major Character Injury
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Wrath on the Lam
Stats:	Published: 2023-02-08 Completed: 2023-03-25 Words: 60,857 Chapters: 17/17

Golden Hour

by kooprdoodl

Summary

= “the period of time immediately after a traumatic injury during which there is the highest likelihood that prompt medical and surgical treatment will prevent death.”

= “the period of daytime shortly after sunrise or before sunset, during which daylight is redder and softer than when the sun is higher in the sky.”

Will was conscious after they impacted the roiling Atlantic.

The next time he’s conscious of his *actions*, they’re in a stolen RV deep in a pine forest. He checks the dashboard’s clock.

It’s the 59th minute of Hannibal’s golden hour.

The Golden Hour

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's 4:43 AM.

I'm in a forest in…Maine…maybe.

…My name is Will Graham.

He kills the engine. As it dies, a heavy silence befalls his new world.

He blinks.

A shudder passes through him, making him acutely aware of damp hair sticking to his scalp and forehead. Every inch of his chilled, clammy skin itches under soggy, sand-dusted clothing. He clenches his jaw to cease his chattering teeth.

At once, pain pierces through his dazed state like another stab to the face. He winces and roughly presses his left hand to the wad of gauze haphazardly taped to his right cheek. His right arm is tied to his chest in an attempt to not reawaken the divot that was chiseled into the respective collarbone. Eyes squeezed shut, he uses his nose to breathe through the roaring agony until he can hear his own thoughts again.

His thoughts whose voice sounds just like…

Will whips around and stares blindly into the darkness. The coppery stench of blood is overriding the subtle musk of seawater. He punches on an overhead light. Under the warm ambient glow, he gingerly climbs into the back where the monster lies.

Except in this moment, prone on the floor, eyes closed, slack mouth slightly parted, and an arm limply draped over the soiled bandage around his shirtless torso, Hannibal couldn't be more achingly human.

On instinct, Will reaches out and places his left palm on the side of Hannibal's head. He relaxes upon contacting the warm skin, though his frigid hand causes Hannibal to sharply inhale and unconsciously twist away.

Will lets his fingers gradually slip down until his thumb is over Hannibal's pulsing carotid artery. The elevated heart rate beats in perfect sync with his own.

He increases the pressure by a fraction.

It would be so easy to press in a little more, and then even more, until his knuckles whiten. Then Hannibal would open his eyes, so Will could witness, in intimate detail, how life drains when fresh blood can no longer reach the brain. Will wouldn't even feel bad. He could

convince himself that it's a mercy kill, that he's doing society a favor, and Hannibal would be honored, if not enraptured, to die in such a way.

He'd also be infuriatingly smug.

...and then what?

Will removes his hand.

His eyes trail down to the scarlet stain that has seeped through the white dressing and then to the even larger puddle growing beneath him. Hannibal was actively applying pressure the last time he saw him. Judging from the size of the stain, it seems he passed out soon after Will put their newly acquired RV into drive.

Fury hits him out of nowhere. If it was anyone else, his rage would be insanely unreasonable. But this is *Hannibal*. He should've known better.

He *did* know better.

Hissing out curses, Will flicks on the main light. He reaches for their duffel bag and rushes to gather packs of hemostatic gauze. He rolls Hannibal onto his stomach, mindful to keep the man's head turned and airway clear. Then he works on a single blue latex glove and fishes out the scissors.

He snips off the wasted bandage. The sopping gauze falls away. Pooling blood obscures the entry wound, but Will remembers its exact location. With his index finger, he shoves in as much QuickClot as possible. Within the hot confines of living, breathing flesh, he can feel Hannibal's initial application. But *clearly* it wasn't enough. Perhaps Hannibal simply underestimated the extent of the cavitation, but Will instantly dismisses the thought. The man was an *ER surgeon,* for fuck's sake!

At last, the wound is thoroughly packed. Will firmly presses down with the excess gauze and eyes the microwave's clock for the time. After several minutes, the tension starts to ease from his shoulders when the blood fails to seep through. He applies some tape just to keep it from slipping and rolls Hannibal onto his back to attend to the exit wound. As expected, the bleeding ceases after applying a much more generous wad of gauze and several minutes of forceful pressure. He secures that into place with tape. Then he pushes Hannibal onto his side and tightly binds his abdomen with a fresh bandage.

As he maneuvers Hannibal's arm out of the way, he checks his pulse. The faint ridge of Hannibal's vertical scar—a relic of his near-Reckoning—registers dimly under his touch. The pulse remains elevated due to the blood loss, but his compensating heart is still beating strongly. Will releases a long sigh, begging his own heart to quit overworking itself.

He whisks up the old dressing and empty wrappers, uses his teeth to peel off the glove, and tosses everything into a garbage can inside one of the cabinets. Then he begins to mop up the bloody puddle with paper towels and dishwashing soap from the counter. He takes extra care to scrape out the blood from the thin gaps in the gray vinyl flooring.

Eventually, the obnoxious odor of artificial citrus fills the interior and masks everything else. Will cracks open a window. The crisp smell of pine amid morning dew is a welcome change.

Still on the floor, Hannibal remains unconscious on his back. This time, his head is supported with a removable bolster from the adjacent seat. So far, the bandage on both sides of his body has kept dry.

The main light clicks off. From his comfy, slouched position on the couch, Will observes the subtle rise and fall of Hannibal's chest. It's the only way to stop himself from thinking ahead.

—about his ridiculous, unsustainable future of doom, despair, and astronomical unknowns.

He remembers, clearly, what he consistently felt when profiling at-large criminals. They are aware of the noose of unshakable charges already looped around their necks, and how their hunters have all the resources, time, and expertise in the world, and the main driving force is outright denial that escape is futile—like a man at the guillotine, who stares into the basket yet wholeheartedly believes in a last-minute stay of execution.

It wasn't too long ago that a killer's poem and a desperately lonesome copycat whisked him away from the jaws of capital punishment. But he was innocent then.

What would he plead now?

Insanity?

He sighs and refocuses on matching his shallow breaths to Hannibal's deep, steady rhythm.

It's strange to see him like this—not only stripped of his dignified person suit, both literally and figuratively, but also to *see* without being seen. It comes with an alluring, irresistible rush of power. It's almost…voyeuristic.

Will smirks for half a second.

Oh, how the tables have turned…

Eyelids getting heavy, he glances at the microwave's clock.

6:17 AM.

His heart leaps back into a panic, expecting lights and sirens or a helicopter beam to appear at any moment. But when the peaceful solitude miraculously persists, he squeezes his eyes shut and drags his left hand down his sore, weary face, careful not to disturb his own bandage. After a few deep breaths through his nose, he rises to his feet. He takes a wobbly step around Hannibal and collapses back into the driver's seat.

The engine rumbles to life.

He buckles in just to shut up the beeping sensor and eyes the dashboard for any problems. But all is well. Even their fuel gauge is barely a hair's width down from full. He switches off

the golden overhead light. After cranking up the heat, he gazes at the volume knob for a moment before deciding to press it.

"—with no name. It felt good to be out of the rain.

"In the desert, you can remember your name. 'Cause there ain't no one for—"

"—to give you no *pain*," Will murmurs, turning up the volume. He peers into the empty side-view mirror as they merge back onto the unlit road and into the deep azure fog.

It's the first minute of their blue hour.

Chapter End Notes

And so begins their post-fall recovery, on-the-lam, camping journey.

Lost Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's beautiful.

His fingers claw into the fabric and skin of Hannibal's shoulder, as if he could tear it off. That person suit. The confines of their flesh.

No more pretenses.

No more deception.

…no more forts.

Blood collecting in his jaw and spilling from his lips, he buries his head into the crook of Hannibal's neck.

And sighs.

He feels the pressure of Hannibal leaning back, the side of his face against his. Will flattens his right palm over Hannibal's chest, slowly sliding it across damp cloth and lax muscle.

And breathes.

For the first—and last—time in his life, Will solely lives in the present.

Past and future cease to exist. Balancing precariously, they stand at a precipice. The bluff, along with the world, has eroded to this last piece of land in the universe. All around them is the void, endless and inescapable.

There will be no going back.

…and that's ok.

He hooks his arm around the back of Hannibal's neck and begins to sway.

A question.

Yet, arms down at his side, Hannibal doesn't tense in the slightest. He is Will's to mold. So Will presses on, further and further, until the equilibrium is lost and their feet leave the ground.

They plummet through the maelstrom. Will tries to hold on, but he feels his grip slipping amid the torrent.

Stay with me!

Then, right before the concrete sea rushes in to claim them, Hannibal's arms fly up.

And lock behind Will's back.

Will thrashes. He struggles to force air into his lungs and kicks out for the brake. But his right foot passes through empty air and bounces off the wall. He claws for the wheel but misses and punches the dashboard.

"*Will*."

Will's eyes snap open, expecting to see the final second of them careening toward a ditch or a tree. But gray fills his vision.

The engine is off.

Gasping, he tries to sit upright but is thrown back into place by the auto-lock of his seatbelt. Staring at the gray ceiling, he drops his left hand, and it lands on something.

The center console.

He's in the passenger seat.

Something moves to his right. Light and heat hit his face. He shuts his eyes against the burn.

Sunlight.

Then a coolness wafts over him. Wind.

From the right.

The initial panic ebbs and gives way to confusion. It's only then that he realizes someone is talking to him.

"Will, can you hear me?"

"I—" Will blinks rapidly, breathless. "I just—"

"Repeat after me. My name is Will Graham."

"M-My name is…" Déjà vu hits him like a splash of ice water. He scowls. "*Dammit!*" Will jabs the seatbelt button. He pushes himself upright and out of the sun's rays.

He squints. Everything is too bright, like an overexposed photo. With each shift of his eyes, afterimages of objects meld and overlay with other things amid a haze of blinding static. His left hand braces against the dashboard in a desperate attempt to ground himself.

"Are you having trouble with your vision?"

Distress rising, Will blinks vainly and rubs his eyes. "I-I don't know I—"

“Here.”

Something cold and solid touches his right arm. Will reaches over with his left, and his fingers close around a glass cup. He desperately brings it to his lips and chugs the fresh water. Once he finishes, Hannibal pulls it from his grasp.

“Lie back, Will. I believe you’re merely experiencing a vasovagal syncope, or…*fainting,* as most people call it.”

Desperate to feel stable again, Will drops back into the reclined seat and tries to deepen his breaths.

“If you’re able, try to place your feet on the dashboard. It will help alleviate the drop in blood pressure caused by your low heart rate and dilated vessels. There’s simply not enough blood reaching your brain.”

Will laughs dryly at that, but he follows Hannibal’s advice. Sure enough, color and clarity gradually return to his sight. As the flashing spots dissolve away and the world dims to an acceptable level, Will looks to his right.

Hannibal, now in a clean white dress shirt and…*jeans*, stands outside the open passenger door. An arm is wrapped around his middle, and his other hand harshly grips the empty cup. His shoulder leans heavily against the frame of the truck.

Suddenly, Will realizes that he’s in new clothes as well—a white cotton t-shirt, charcoal gray sweatpants, and white socks, no shoes. His right arm now rests in a beige sling. He places a hand to the back of his head and discovers that his tousled hair is soft and dry. The pervasive, irritating layer of grime, sand, and dried seawater is gone, scrubbed clean. He looks back up.

They stare for a long moment. Hannibal appears to be seconds from keeling over.

“You should sit down,” Will murmurs. Hannibal lowers his chin. With effort, he pushes himself away from the truck and steps into the back.

The side door closes. Will hears the cup being placed in the sink, followed by a body collapsing onto the couch.

For a while, they say nothing. Will listens to the soft rustle of branches. The gentle breeze rhythmically passes through the towering trees like waves rippling on the shoreline. Now and then, a few birds flit by, chirping and trilling. The RV seems to be somewhere far off-road among the trees. He glances at the dashboard.

It’s 2:57 PM.

“I suppose I owe you an apology,” Hannibal finally says. “Your neck was at an extreme angle, so I thought it would be beneficial to recline your seat.”

Staring at the ceiling, Will swallows. “…thanks.” Once the wave of affection fades to an ignorable level, he frowns. “How… How did I get here?”

Hannibal is silent, and Will can clearly envision the questioning head tilt. Hannibal's lips part, "Are you losing time again?"

Will sighs and presses his left palm over his eyes. He freezes when his fingers brush over something scratchy where his bandage used to be—a neat row of small lines.

"When did this happen?"

"The stitches?"

"Yeah."

He hears the couch shift. "What do you remember?"

"Um…" Will pinches the bridge of his nose. "Driving. You were bleeding out… I changed the dressing. Then I pulled back onto the road." He furrows his brow, but his mind keeps drawing a blank. It may as well be stuffed with cotton. "I don't know, that's it."

Hannibal hums softly. "How…regrettable."

Will snaps open his eyes. "*What*?"

"Don't work yourself up again, Will. I'm sure you'll remember in due time. But for the moment, it's not important."

Will scowls, but the pull of the stitches puts a stop to his anger. "How did you get the RV?"

"Will, I can hardly walk."

"Yeah, so?"

"This is not my vehicle, if that's what you're implying."

Oh God…

Dread sinks its icy claws into his chest. He drapes his left arm over his eyes. "What happened," he demands, not asks.

Hannibal pauses. "I admit, the extent of your amnesia may be a cause for concern—"

"*Hannibal*."

"With our extensive history of mutual deceit, you'd ask for my account? Or have you forgotten about that as well?"

Will wants to sneer. After all the tiptoeing and niceties, it's honestly a relief to feel that familiar sting of abrasion. But he doesn't yet have the energy to spar. In truth, neither does he have the motivation. "Yes," he answers curtly. "I believe you."

Hannibal doesn't respond.

Suddenly, an oddly cheerful bell dings, effectively slicing through the tension.

A kitchen timer.

Will lifts his eyebrows. He didn't realize something was cooking. "That the *owner*?"

"If only…" Hannibal mutters. With a soft grunt, he rises from the couch. Will twists around to see Hannibal stagger to the small stove and uncover a pot. "Due to the type of antibiotics and painkillers we're on, it's advisable that we stick to a bland diet for a time."

Will angles his seat back into its upright position and closes the passenger door. He carefully steps over the center console and into the living area. As Hannibal drains the steaming water from the hard-boiled eggs, Will narrows his eyes at the plastic bag and frosting nozzle on the narrow, faux granite counter.

"The *hell* is that for?" Will asks, watching Hannibal's hands quake as his oddly uncoordinated fingers struggle to peel off the shells.

"The deviled eggs."

Will sighs loudly and shoves his way in front of Hannibal, who snarls but begrudgingly takes a seat at the dinette.

Although inelegant and forced to rely on his non-dominant hand, Will is timely as he cracks and peels the rest of the eggs. He chops and combines them with mayonnaise, a spoonful of mustard, and a pinch of salt, pepper, and paprika. He evenly spreads the contents over two slices of whole wheat bread. Then he rinses a few leaves of romaine lettuce, snaps them in half, and adds them on top, followed by another slice of bread. Last, he cuts each sandwich diagonally and sets a plate in front of Hannibal, who eyes it in silence.

Will pays him no heed while he pours them each a glass of orange juice. With the drinks and sandwiches in place, he takes a seat across from Hannibal and immediately begins chowing down.

After a minute, Hannibal slowly starts eating as well. Will can't contain his smirk mid-chew. He swallows. "Y'know, it occurred to me that chewing might be a problem, but you must really have me on the *good stuff,* 'cause I hardly feel a thing." He washes it down with a swig of orange juice.

Hannibal keeps his eyes downcast and minutely nods. "My own special blend." Taking small bites, he slowly works through his sandwich.

After finishing his own serving, Will sets down his half-empty glass and sighs. "Are you pissed that our first meal together in, what, nearly *four years* is a crappy egg salad sandwich?" He takes a few more gulps from his cup. "Your shitty, parsley-thyme, *brain-seasoning* soup doesn't count."

For a millisecond, the faintest of smiles graces Hannibal's lips. Anyone else would've missed it but not Will. "On the contrary, I find nothing appalling about this meal. There is depth to

the simplicity, and the flavors, though subtle, are a welcome respite for our sensitive palates."

Will looks away as he fiddles with his empty glass. He was so ready to snap at Hannibal for mocking him, but his god-tier empathy isn't picking up on any hints of sarcasm. He digs and digs, but all he finds is baffling sincerity.

"I like the sandwich, Will," Hannibal cuts in through the raucous storm of Will's thoughts. "I probably won't finish, since I've been slow to recover my appetite. But I'm not, as some would say…'fucking' with you."

"Ok—" Empty plate and cup in hand, Will gets up with a start and bumps the small table in the process. "Clearly you're on the *real* good stuff."

This time, Hannibal's smirk lasts a quarter of a second.

Mindful to use as little water as possible, Will cleans the dishes, dries them, and sets them back into the cabinets. Then he wraps up Hannibal's uneaten portion and stows it in the fridge. Hannibal nods in thanks and then shakily rises to his feet.

Will watches as the once superhuman being hobbles by, using the walls for extra support. "You…ok?"

Hannibal shoots him a glare, but he calms himself the next second. "I just need to rest." He pauses. "Your antibiotics are in the front left pocket of the duffel bag. Small white bottle. White circular tablets. Take one twice a day after a meal. …This will be your first dose."

"What about you?"

"I'm on a different type and schedule."

Will fidgets and shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "Should we keep driving?"

"If you feel up to it."

"I am. Where are we going?"

Hannibal huffs. "Forgot that as well? No matter. Just follow this road to the end…and escape into the forest, if necessary."

Will glowers at the frustratingly vague instructions. "Ok…"

"There's no point in telling you more. We won't be reaching our destination today." With that, Hannibal steps into the bedroom area and slides the privacy screen shut.

Will lingers. It's so tempting to move in a little closer until he can press an ear to the barrier. But Hannibal would undoubtedly sense, as well as smell, that he's there. Instead, Will opens a door on the side and ducks into the bathroom.

He's pleased to see a decently sized shower. A variety of soap bottles are stuffed into the single shelf. It's obvious which ones are Hannibal's. Water droplets still dot the walls. Two

dark blue towels, still damp, are draped on the nearby bar.

He's also relieved to feel déjà vu as he scans the small yet clean space. He feels inclined to believe that he *did* wash himself and not…the other way around.

Again.

It makes sense. Hannibal hardly seems capable of standing on his own for more than a few… minutes……

Will freezes. He smacks a hand to his forehead.

Did I...?

He stares at his own aghast face in the mirror as the notion dawns on him.

You idiot, why else would he be wearing jeans*?!*

Heart thumping in his ears, Will swallows hard. "How…regrettable," echoes almost snidely in his mind. But he doesn't know for sure. Obviously, Hannibal stitched up his face, meaning the man was fully conscious at some point.

Will furrows his brow, shifting focus and trying hard to remember how he ended up in the passenger seat. That must've been after the shower and stitches. Hannibal would've been driving at some point. Then he probably decided to pull into the forest for a lunch break. Will was starving. The sandwiches seem to be the first thing they've eaten since the wine at the cliff house, though technically Hannibal never got a taste of his own serving.

With a headache, Will stumbles out of the bathroom and closes the door. The soft, plush couch beckons him, but he passes it by and climbs into the driver's seat. He sighs as he adjusts the seat forward a few inches and fusses with the mirrors.

The engine starts up. He eyes the fuel gauge.

Roughly three-quarters left.

He nods. Upon unmuting the radio, his ears are assaulted by some sort of melodramatic opera music. Grimacing, he switches the station.

"*—highway to Hell! Highway to—"*

Next.

"*—killing me softly with his song, killing me—"*

Nope.

Canned audience laughter. "So I'm like, 'Jim…that's *cannibalism!*'" More laughter.

“God dammit.” Will switches to the next station. The RV jostles as he maneuvers between the trees and over the buried roots.

“‘—you’re goin’ to Winnemucca, Mack, with me you can ride…’

“And so I climbed into the cab, and then I settled down inside…”

Grinning madly, Will cranks the volume up until there’s no way Hannibal can avoid the dulcet country tones.

“He asked me if I’d seen a road with so much dust and sand…”

This time, he has to wait for a few long haul truckers to pass.

“And I said—”

“‘Listen.’” As the next opening approaches, Will clears his throat, deepens his vocal cords, and calls upon an accent from his distant past: “*‘I’ve traveled every road in this here la-a-and…’*”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been everywhere, man. I’ve been everywhere~

~~He definitely stuck his head out the window and shouted the “I’m a killer” part.~~

Empathy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will is about to cut the engine when "breaking news" hits the airwaves. The dramatic jingle subsides.

"The FBI has now confirmed that Hannibal Lecter, otherwise known as the Chesapeake Ripper and the Copycat Killer, is *missing* following an ambush attack that resulted in the deaths of at least six. A seventh individual, who's associated with the FBI, is also missing."

"We have reason to believe that the Tooth Fairy Killer is responsible." Jack's voice, although even and monotonous, sends a chill down Will's spine. Jack is certainly going to kill him for this…unless some part of him expected this.

…perhaps *wanted* this.

"It's unclear if the missing agent was kidnapped or complicit. But we're not ruling anything out."

Will scoffs. If they somehow weren't sure before, then the scene at the cliff house will leave little room for doubt.

"However, the FBI does *not* consider the Tooth Fairy to be a threat to society."

"We tracked a stolen police car to an isolated residence, which is where we located the Tooth Fairy. We can confirm that he's down, but we're not releasing any more details at this time."

Will chuckles. It's a flimsy attempt to temporarily avoid more questions, but the public's outrage will backfire spectacularly.

"We also can't confirm if the nearby carjacking is related, but we're looking into it."

Will's heart skips a beat. He quickly turns up the volume.

"Even unarmed, Lecter is considered extremely dangerous and should not be approached. Stay in a well lit area among other people, and call 911 once it's safe to do so."

Rolling his eyes, he's about to turn the key when the reporter returns.

"The missing individual is reportedly a former FBI profiler. His family was recently targeted by the Tooth Fairy Killer in an attack that left one bystander dead. His wife, who is currently in serious but stable condition, released the following message last night…"

"*Will*?"

He stops breathing.

“I know you’re out there. And I know you’ve seen some terrible things.” Her voice wavers. “I just…”

A torrent of pain, betrayal, and desperate sadness crashes over him in a tidal wave. Will clamps a hand over his mouth against the onslaught. He can feel the hard band of gold pressing against his lips.

“You’re hurting. I know that. And there are just *things* that I can never understand. I get that. …But I do love you. Wally loves you. The dogs miss you.” She scoffs. “*Hell*, I’m pretty sure they miss your cooking too…”

Resentful tears well and overflow from his eyes.

But they’re not *his*.

“It’s not too late. You can come back. And Lecter—”

Will shuts off the engine. After a long moment of nothing but his strained heaving, he removes his hand from his sodden face and leans back into the seat.

“She’s right.” Hannibal’s voice is soft from his place several feet behind him. “What I said before still stands. You can go back. …If there’s any point.”

Will sniffs and dries his face with his sleeve. He takes several more deep breaths to quell the foreign ache in his chest and throat. “*Yeah*, and what would *you* do? Send in another *dragon*?” he spits out, venom lacing every word.

“I would turn myself in. There’s no reason to send in another killer. She has already proven herself, and it was not by ‘luck,’ as you claimed.” He hears Hannibal seat himself at the dinette and place a few small items on the table. “As for us, we would go back to how we were. I, your caged beast, and you, knowing where you can always find me.”

“I don’t *want* you to be *caged*,” Will hisses. “I wanted you to *leave*.”

“You should know by now that I couldn’t leave without you.”

Those haunting words hang in the suffocating space between them. Will stares through the rain-spotted windshield and into the infinite darkness of the woods. Somewhere looming in the murky depths is the shadow of the gutted stag, staring back at him.

“Come. You’re due for your next dose of pain relief.” Plastic wrappers crinkle. “That *is* why you stopped, isn’t it?”

Will sighs, gripping his throbbing right shoulder. “That, and I’m hungry.” With a grunt, he rises from the driver’s seat and makes his way to the dinette.

His blood runs cold upon seeing the small glass bottle and syringe.

Hannibal is busy tapping out the air bubbles. Yet he notices Will hesitating. “Have a seat.” He pats the table. “Remove the sling and extend your right arm.”

Will sinks into the booth, but he remains still, arms close to his body. "…what is that?"

"This is just meant to help you sleep—"

"I don't need help."

"I *mean*, it will help you manage your pain and allow you to move your right arm into a comfortable position while you sleep." Hannibal sighs. "You may feel a bit drowsy but not to the point of incapacitation."

Will lifts his gaze and stares directly into Hannibal's eyes. Again, all he finds is sincerity. He slowly unbuckles the sling and winces when he tries to extend his stiff joints. The slightest movement puts an awful strain on the damaged collarbone.

Hannibal observes patiently. Once the underside of Will's forearm is exposed on the table, Hannibal wipes the center with an alcohol pad and hones in the needle on a vein.

Will holds his breath, self-conscious of his racing heart. Hannibal glances at him once. Then the needle slips beneath skin. Will nearly flinches but manages to keep still. Hannibal quickly depresses the plunger, and in a few seconds, it's over.

He removes the needle and firmly presses his thumb over the injection site. Will exhales. At once, he feels his shoulders drop with the familiar sensation of every muscle in his body easing. Melting.

It's too much.

"No-no-*no*—" Betrayal hits him like a shot to the heart. He panics.

"Will." A warm, firm hand immediately closes over his left shoulder. It gently pushes him into the backrest. "Relax. This feeling will pass in less than a minute. You're fine."

Will tries to lift his head, but it merely rolls to the side. He hears Hannibal get up and dispose of the plastic.

"…why…?"

Hannibal returns to his seat across from him.

"Why did you…" Will squeezes his unfocused eyes shut. "If you wanted to…show me…" He gradually starts to feel his strength return to him, but it's too late. His mind is already there—at that dark dining room table. The belt is too tight around his ribs. The menu is all *wrong*.

His executioner is seated to his right.

Sorrow passes over the man's weary face. They're both scabbed and scuffed up again. Hannibal parts his lips a second before he speaks. "Even if you didn't forgive as God forgives, my mind had already made its choice. At the time, I believed it was the right thing to do. I thought…this was the only way we'd ever be able to coexist."

"Be together," goes unsaid, yet Will hears it anyway. He sneers. "…Even then, not for long. I have no doubt eating my brain would've driven you mad and *killed* you."

"Not only that, but you warned me years ago that your thoughts aren't particularly *tasty*. Frying your gray matter in butter certainly wouldn't have helped."

Will cackles, and Hannibal grins fondly. But the levity soon slips away like sand through quaking fingers.

Will's vision distorts through the rise of stinging water. Gnawing at his lower lip, he waits for Hannibal to lock eyes with him, and whispers:

"I was *so…afraid.*"

A single tear drips down Will's face, and this time, it's truly his own.

"Unavoidable…unfortunately." Hannibal takes in a sharp breath. "But I wanted you to be aware…and with me. And I thought you would have preferred the same."

"I did."

Eyes downcast, Hannibal pauses. After a long minute, he leans back, crosses his legs, and folds his hands over his lap. "Then what did you fear?"

The walls of the dining room fall away, and from the earth rises the deep red of Hannibal's office. It's far too late at night. They're seated at the desk—Hannibal in his striped chair and Will just to his left. Their drinks sit half-empty. Between them, a white teacup lays shattered on the floor, along with the hopes of a fatherhood that was never meant to be.

Will brushes away the teardrop with his thumb. He glares intensely through watery eyes. "That it would *hurt*."

"But it didn't."

"No…" The corner of his mouth twitches. "You made sure of that."

Hannibal nods.

"Why?"

"Your suffering is indistinguishable from my own…and it's been that way for quite some time now."

"Even when you gave me that *smile*?"

"*Especially* then."

Blinking, Will averts his eyes. "Then—" He can hardly believe what he's hearing. But he hopes with all his heart that it's true. "Then that's……*empathy*."

“Yes.” Hannibal nods and glances off to the side as well. “…Only for you.”

At the exact same time, they decide to face each other. The moment their eyes meet, all they see is a reflection, identically different, staring back. In the warm glow of the fireplace, tender sparks of emotion flicker upon the windows to their souls.

Then the past fizzles out. Under lock and key, it returns to its rightful place.

A distant memory.

The ache dwindling, Will releases a long sigh. “…What’s for dinner?”

Hannibal smirks softly, and Will reflects him. “Leftovers, I suppose. At least for me.”

Will nods and glances at the fridge. “I think I’ll just have soup.”

Hannibal hums. “How fitting.”

“Shut up.” With both hands braced on the table, Will rises and makes his way to the cupboards. The sling lays forgotten on the ground.

Will slurps at a bowl of microwaved chicken noodle soup. An opened packet of saltine crackers sits on a small plate. Across from him, Hannibal nibbles on the other half of his egg salad sandwich. Both of their glasses are filled with water.

“So, uh…” Will begins between sips. “What’s going on with you?”

“With what?”

“Your… I mean…” Will wrinkles his brow as he fumbles for the words. “You don’t still have QuickClot in you, right?”

“Of *course* not.”

“Yeah, so… What happened?”

Hannibal stares at him for a long moment and sighs. “To the best of my ability, we performed surgery.”

Will nearly chokes, but he forces himself to swallow. “*We*?”

“This would be easier to understand if only you’d remember.”

With his right hand, Will massages his temples. “Well, I don’t, ok?”

“I believe you’re just blocking the memory.” Hannibal tilts his head as he muses. “I suppose I can see why…”

Will blinks rapidly, mind immediately jumping to the shower he doesn't recall. He quickly reaches for his water and chugs. Then he sets down the empty glass with a resounding thud. "Whatever, just tell me the prognosis, then. Are you good?"

Hannibal looks away and shifts his jaw.

"Hannibal?"

"As well as can be expected."

Will frowns. "What?"

"I don't believe the bullet perforated any organs, but the damage is quite extensive. Septicemia is posing the greatest threat."

Will's hands go cold. "…you have sepsis?"

"No." Hannibal swallows another small bite of his sandwich. "At least, not yet."

A heavy silence befalls them. Will sits back, glaring at the excess broth in his bowl, fingers fidgeting madly.

"Is there anythi—"

"There's a town less than an hour away. Tomorrow, you can pick up a prescription, along with anything else you'd like."

"Why can't we go now?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "It's closed."

Will scowls. "Why didn't you tell me? I could've driven faster! We could've gone before—"

"*No*, Will…" Hannibal snaps but trails off. He finishes the last piece of bread and sits back. "Regardless, you need to be in your best condition, in the event that you're stopped."

With a loud sigh, Will gets up and grabs all of their dishes. Hannibal disappears into the bathroom while Will cleans. By the time each dish and utensil is back in its place, Hannibal has moved into the bedroom.

Will sneaks a glance as he ducks into the vacated bathroom. Wearing only a pair of light gray sweatpants, Hannibal is seated on the bed and inserting a cannula into the back of his hand. Around his middle is a white bandage that covers his entire abdomen.

Will closes the bathroom door behind him. Staring into the mirror, he pulls off his shirt and flattens a palm over his crooked "smile."

"I believe the couch folds out into a bed."

Will merely looks. In only a t-shirt and boxers, he stands in the middle of the dark living space. “Yeah…” he mumbles after a while.

“The compartment above the cab is also meant to double as a sleeping area.”

Will eyes it. Even if he moved the duffel bag and the previous owner’s supplies, he shudders at the thought of lying in that windowless, coffin-like space.

Hannibal briefly pauses his IV preparations. “It seems possible for the dinette area to convert into a bed, but the length would scarcely be more than five and a half feet.”

Will gazes at it in silence.

Defeated, Hannibal sighs. “*Well*, please close the screen door once you’ve made up your mind.” With that, he reclines into the left side of the bed and pulls over the covers.

Will waits. Once Hannibal seems settled, he slowly approaches the bedroom. With the RV’s slide out, it feels surprisingly spacious. The shades are drawn over the two windows, one on each side. He opens a large cabinet and finds a few drab coats and slacks already hanging inside. The smaller cabinets contain a random assortment of clothes, though the selection is sparse, as well as extra sheets, blankets, and pillow cases.

Exhaling through his nose, he slides the screen door shut and stands at the foot of the bed. He knows Hannibal isn’t yet asleep, but his eyes stay closed and he remains perfectly still. Two IV bags hang from a hook in one of the overhead cabinets. The clear tubing is taped to his right arm, which rests on the nightstand. On the right side of the queen-sized bed, the covers are already folded back.

After much hesitation, Will takes a step. The second his knees hit the mattress, they buckle, and he collapses into the soft, cool bedding. His heavy eyelids snap shut while his head sinks into the impossibly fluffy pillow.

Will sighs.

After flattening the duvet over his body, he gradually becomes aware of the subtle warmth and incline of the mattress just to his right.

He doesn’t remember falling asleep.

For the first time in decades, he dreams of nothing.

Chapter End Notes

More heartfelt convos ahead.

Chicken Soup

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional CW

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will slowly opens his eyes to light. Warmth. He's leaning on something smooth. He nuzzles closer.

Solid and warm.

Skin.

...Shit!

With a gasp, he jolts off Hannibal's back and retracts his left arm, which was draped over the man's side. In a second, he's stumbling off the bed, feet tangled in the covers.

His face turns beet red as he struggles to free himself from the sheets. Mind frantically scrambling for excuses—something, *anything*—to rescue him from the humiliation, he braces for the inevitable snooty, snide remarks.

But there's only silence. Hannibal doesn't stir.

Perplexed and then abruptly concerned, he hurries to the other side of the bed and reaches for Hannibal's neck.

A pulse.

Slow, yet strong and steady.

Will releases a breath, and Hannibal seems to sigh as well under Will's touch.

Withdrawing his hand, he looks over the man lying limply on his right side. The IV tubing is still taped to his hand.

"Hannibal?"

But there's no response. Getting desperate, Will shakes Hannibal's shoulder.

"Hannibal!"

Nothing.

Dread seizes Will when his brain makes the jump to "coma" and "septic shock." Hands beginning to shake, he backs up into the wall as his catastrophizing mind begins to spiral.

And that's when he realizes…

There's no pain.

He rolls his right shoulder. There's a slight twinge, but it's hardly more than a pin prick. The same goes for the right side of his mouth when he tentatively flexes his jaw and runs his tongue along the neat inner row of stitches.

He glances at his right forearm.

Did he…?

A cool breeze wafts in from behind. He turns to see that the screen door is fully open. Stepping into the living area, his eyes land on a folded piece of printer paper on the counter. Two black leather billfolds and two burner phones weigh it down. He picks up the wallets.

Inside the first is $500 worth of cash, a fake driver's license for the state of Maryland, and a few credit cards. All are under the name Liam Graves.

The second one has $300 and cards under the name Bill Grant of Virginia.

Will rolls his eyes as he tosses them onto the counter. He opens the white paper.

It's a prescription for some apparently potent antibiotics.

…signed by Dr. Hans Decker.

He cackles.

A second paper drops between his feet. He scoops it up and is met with a *wall* of flowing cursive. Muttering expletives, he squints at the letters and strains to decipher the glyphs. To make matters worse, it's clear they were written with a ballpoint pen. Some of the words are hopelessly smudged.

"Chi… An…ti…? What?" He furrows his brow while holding the paper inches from his face. "Fa…va…beans—"

Will smacks a hand to his forehead.

It's a fucking shopping list.

Despite suddenly wishing they both drowned in the Atlantic, he skims through the rest of it and discovers a small note at the bottom corner:

Breakfast is in the fridge. Don't forget your pills.

Will scoffs at that last part. They've already become an old married couple. Setting the paper aside, he opens the fridge. In the top center shelf is a familiar ceramic Tupperware. He pulls it out, and sure enough, beneath the condensation on the clear lid is a protein scramble.

Will wonders if the sausages were laced with copious amounts of caffeine or…something else, because for the next eight hours, he speeds through town and manages to acquire everything on the list.

And *more*.

Before heading out, he decided to shave his beard and gel back his hair. Once finished, he barely recognized himself in the mirror, which was an encouraging sign.

Then he perused the stock online, called ahead, and planned out how he would visit each store. Sometimes he was Liam, in aviators, a salmon dress shirt, khaki shorts, sock-less loafers, and a fake beard to cover his stitches. Other times, he was Bill, with a black hoodie, a New York Yankees baseball cap, cycling sunglasses, baggy jeans, and sneakers.

For smaller loads such as groceries, he parked the RV in a blind spot several blocks down and carried the bags back. For larger items, such as fishing gear and camping supplies, he would alternate between using an SUV rideshare driver and straight up parking the RV in the store's lot.

The town was large enough so that a traveler going on a shopping spree didn't seem unusual at all. But Will knew it was only a matter of time before the FBI caught on to his money trail. Still, he felt confident that his precautions would earn them at least a couple more days.

If only he could see Jack's face the moment he connects their "names."

Night has fallen by the time "Bill" steps into the RV for the last time. Clutched to his side is a thin rectangular gift wrapped in brown paper and tied with a bow of twine.

He scans the now cramped interior of the RV. Then an idea dawns on him. Stopping beside the dinette, he hooks his fingers under one of the seat cushions. Sure enough, it swings up, revealing a hollow compartment within. He places the gift inside and quietly closes the lid.

After tossing aside the cap and sunglasses, he decides to check on Hannibal. The screen door is closed.

That's new.

Hope swells in his chest. Eager to boast about the day's success, he slides it open.

The bedroom is dark. Squinting, he can barely make out a figure lying on the bed. Worried, he walks over and reaches for the pulse point on his neck.

A hand clamps down on his wrist.

Suddenly, the room spins upside down as Will is sent flying. His back and head slam against the wall with a loud thud, and he crumples to the ground, dazed. With the wind knocked out of him, he tries to roll to his hands and knees, but an immense weight shoves him back and straddles his torso. Just as he recovers enough air to shout, two large hands grip his neck and thumbs press down hard into his windpipe.

Nothing escapes his gaping mouth as he frantically kicks and claws. In desperation, he repeatedly knees him in the back, but Hannibal doesn't budge in the slightest. Head pounding from the overwhelming pressure and lack of oxygen, his brilliant mind suddenly reminds him of the light switch. Seconds from blacking out, he starts kicking for the wall.

Once.

Twice.

Will's watery eyes begin to roll back as his hands fall away. His body spasms. But his brain sends the signal to kick out one more time.

A click.

Blinding light floods the room.

The pressure falters.

As if jolted by electricity, Hannibal releases him and leaps back. Will immediately gasps in precious lungfuls of air and launches into an endless coughing fit. Weakly writhing on the floor, he paws at his bruised throat. Tinnitus blares in his clogged ears.

"*Will*," he barely hears amid the murky sounds and his own violent gagging. At least the ringing seems to be fading. "I didn't… Why didn't you…"

"No, it's Bill Grant, you stupid fuck!" is what he wants to say, if only he can stop coughing.

Suddenly, he finds himself being dragged upright. He blinks and then realizes that he's on the bed. Pillows and blankets are quickly shoved beneath his shoulders and head until his upper body is at an incline.

The new angle helps marginally, but the burn in his throat is unbearable. He screws his eyes shut against the pain.

"No, Will!" Hannibal's shout startles him, and he opens his eyes. He's never heard him raise his voice before. A hand gently pats the uninjured side of his face. "That's it. Stay awake."

Then the hand is gone. Will dimly registers rapid footfalls, followed by some clattering. The next moment, the mattress dips to his right.

Something horrifically cold touches his throat. Then his own hand is being placed over it—a plastic bag of ice.

"Hold this," Hannibal murmurs. He then snakes an arm beneath Will's shoulders and pulls him nearly upright. Something small is being pressed to his lips. "Anti-inflammatory," he explains.

Ah, right. Aspirin, my old friend.

Recalling how many he used to consume back in the day, he assumes that whatever this is will be significantly more potent and takes the pill. He carefully works it toward the back of his mouth between coughs. Hannibal grabs the fresh glass of water from the nightstand. He positions the rim at Will's lower lip. Used to swallowing pills dry, Will tries to refuse, but Hannibal insists. Fuming, he reluctantly takes a sip. As expected, the water burns all the way down. He sputters.

Hannibal sets the glass aside and gently lowers him back onto the mountain of pillows. "How is your breathing?"

Will glares daggers, death, and bloodlust. If looks could kill, Hannibal would be the "Wound Man" right now.

But Hannibal stares back, unfazed. "We need to keep the swelling down. You have to let me know if you experience trouble breathing."

Great…

"…too…c'ld…" he scratches out, voice horrifically gravelly.

Hannibal disappears and then returns with a small washcloth. He wraps the bag of ice and places it back over Will's throat before repositioning Will's hand.

Eventually, the raucous coughing subsides. But a constant burn lingers in its wake. Breathing through his nose, Will winces through the irritation. Hannibal watches him intently the entire time, as if analyzing each breath. After a few minutes, he assists Will with another sip of water.

He sets down the cup. But instead of releasing him, Hannibal wraps his other arm around Will and pulls him close. Brow furrowed, Will blinks rapidly as Hannibal presses the side of his mouth to the top of Will's head. He inhales deeply through his nose and sighs. "You changed your aftershave…"

Holy shit, never again.

From the crook of Hannibal's neck, Will rolls his eyes. It's like when a dog fails to recognize its owner, except instead of flinching away and timidly attempting to investigate, Hannibal straight-up tried to kill him and put everything he had into it.

A hand creeps up and works its way through Will's hair. Hannibal is merely checking for bumps, but Will closes his eyes at the sensation of long fingers deftly running across his scalp. Then the hand lowers to graze along the column of his spine. Will stifles a shiver.

"Are you experiencing any abnormalities in your vision? Sharp pain in your neck or back? Any difficulties moving your limbs?"

Will's stuffy mind struggles to keep up. But he catches the last question and somewhat shifts his legs. "…no…"

He feels Hannibal softly nod against his head. After several long minutes, during which Will's patience was wearing dangerously thin, Hannibal finally lowers him back onto the bed and rises. "I'll make dinner. Keep the ice applied to your neck. Stay awake, otherwise I'll have to rouse you."

Will sighs, staring blankly at the ceiling and the fake wood grain on the overhead cabinets. With nothing else to do, he proceeds to fantasize a thousand and one ways to kill Hannibal.

With my hands.

"You made me chicken soup."

"Yes."

Will lifts a spoonful of the steaming, dark broth. He takes a second to breathe in the delectable herbal aroma before taking a sip of the warm liquid. At once, he's struck with notes of wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, and star anise. As he swallows, he admits only to his inner voice that he genuinely missed this soup—silkie chicken in a broth.

Hannibal finally allows himself to partake in his own serving. Silverware clinks as they eat in tense silence.

Will recalls the secret gift hidden in his seat and then promptly, and very spitefully, decides to forget about it.

"I'm not yet accustomed to seeing you without facial hair," Hannibal muses between spoonfuls.

"It'll grow back soon enough, if that's what you prefer—" Will nearly chokes. He doesn't know why that last part slipped out.

Hannibal fails to suppress his smirk. He then takes a gander at the plethora of supplies now crammed in every last bit of storage space. "I assume you had no trouble?"

"Not 'til I came ho—" Will winces again and runs a hand down his face.

Jesus Christ, I'm losing it.

Somber, Hannibal looks down at his bowl. "For once, I'm grateful to not be at full strength. I shudder to think what would've happened if I……"

Unopposed to receiving an apology, Will waits for him to continue. But Hannibal sits frozen, spoon halfway to his mouth, as if time has stopped. With a sigh, Will releases his own spoon and leans back into his seat. He crosses his arms.

"So you don't want to kill me anymore?"

"No." Hannibal suddenly unpauses and continues eating. "Not like that."

Will arches an eyebrow. “Then like what?”

Hannibal stirs absentmindedly. “With respect, for one.”

Massaging his temples, Will groans. “Just give it to me straight.”

“I would drug you.” Hannibal glances at him. “And let you have a quiet, nice sleep until your death, and then……”

As Hannibal stalls out again, Will considers the scenario. “Sounds…anti-climactic.” He takes a sip of water. “So you’d put me out of my misery, is what you’re saying. Like a dog.”

Hannibal blinks and puts a contemplative hand to his mouth. “Admittedly, I never thought about it in that light.”

Elbows on the table, Will rubs his tired eyes. “Oh *God*, where do I even start…”

“You don’t have to. You shouldn’t. For now.” Averting his eyes, Hannibal clicks his tongue. “Especially considering how you’re due for more pain medication, with which I can understand why you may feel resistant to, in light of this particular conversation. But I assure you, its contents will be no different from last time. If anything, I’ve been gradually decreasing the dose.”

Will sighs. “It’s fine. I believe you.”

With a nod, Hannibal gets up to prepare the syringe while Will once again handles their dishes. They reconvene at the dinette. Will extends his arm.

He’s hardly begun to think about it by the time Hannibal is capping the used needle. He removes his thumb from the injection site.

“I didn’t even feel it this time,” Will notes.

Hannibal nods once. “Good.”

While he gathers up and discards all the packaging, Will remains seated and stares intently at the table. As the drug kicks in, perhaps so does his courage.

No more forts…

“I’d still do it with my hands, in case you’re wondering,” Will calls after him, voice hoarse.

Hannibal stops just outside the bedroom. He once again has a hand braced over his middle and is slumped against the wall for support. Their scuffle certainly didn’t do him any favors.

Such is their zero-sum game.

Gazing at the faded brand on the man’s back, Will smirks. “Fortunately, I still find you *very* interesting.”

Hannibal lifts his head. With effort, he slowly turns and gives Will a rare gift.

A toothy smile.

Chapter End Notes

It’s a good thing Hannibal kept to himself that he would “smoke Will’s ears.”

After You

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional TW

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will slowly opens his eyes. He sees the ceiling and the overhead cabinets. Relieved to not be faceplanted into Hannibal's back again, he begins to get up.

And freezes.

There's a firm pressure on his chest. Glancing down, he discovers that Hannibal's right arm is draped on top of him. His palm is directly over Will's heart.

Holding his breath, Will's eyes flick to the right. Hannibal is lying on his stomach with his head turned toward him. His hair is ruffled, and his mouth is slightly parted as he sleeps.

Not daring to move a muscle, Will stares back, wide-eyed.

"Han— Hannibal." He swallows nervously. "I actually *hate* the harpsichord."

Silence.

Emboldened, he takes a deep breath. "The theremin is even *worse*!"

When Hannibal doesn't move, Will gingerly lifts the heavy arm and sets it to the side. Then he quickly slips out of bed and away from the danger zone.

After fetching a flannel shirt and jeans from the wardrobe, he looks back at Hannibal. Different from last night, the IV is currently connected to his left hand, which is dangling off the bed. The tube is pulled taut.

Sighing, Will ventures in and places Hannibal's arm on the nightstand. For a long moment, he watches the steady rise and fall of his back. Then he takes the chance and reaches over to touch Hannibal's forehead.

Fever.

Alone at the dinette, Will slowly deciphers the recently smeared cursive as he works his way through a plate of reheated high-life eggs and sausage.

Dear Will,

Finish your preparations. This will be the last time we can access city amenities for quite some time.

I predict that you will encounter at least one roadblock. The license plates are already switched. Your new ID is in the center console, and the corresponding vehicle registration is in the glove compartment.

When ready, head northwest into the forest and as far away from civilization as possible. Take backroads and throw off your trail. Use all of your fuel, if you must.

Find yourself a quiet stream.

H. L.

After finishing his breakfast and burning the note in the flames of the gas stove, Will slumps into the driver's seat and opens the center console. He fishes out a brown billfold and looks inside.

He smacks his head.

"Phil… Lam?"

Grinning, Will nods enthusiastically through the half-open driver's side window. Through jet black sunglasses, the state trooper glares at him and then at his ID. Will has reapplied the fake beard to match the photo and cover up his stitches. A scarf covers the hand-shaped bruises on his neck.

"Drove all the way from Louisiana?"

"Yup, just got tired of the humidity," he says with a subtle drawl. The residual scratchiness further masks the timbre of his real voice. "Glad to finally be up north."

Without acknowledging him, the trooper steps back to run the plates. Will takes the opportunity to wipe his sweaty palms on his pants and push back the failing adhesive on his beard.

After seemingly ages, the trooper saunters back to the window. He sighs. "Roll it all the way down, sir." Nervous, Will does so, and the man briefly peers inside. "You've got quite the haul here."

Will nods and glances back as well, hoping he didn't leave anything conspicuous out. "Yeah. Long trip. Just need to *get away* for a while, y'know?"

Will mentally kicks himself.

The trooper gestures to the back. "What's behind that screen? Anyone back there?"

"Oh, uh, no. It's, uh… Just my dog."

The trooper gives him a look. “Oh, it’s quiet.”

“Yeahhh, he don’t bark much.”

“What kind?”

“Um—” Will swallows hard and clears his throat. “Well, it’s hard to say. He’s kind of a mix, but I always saw him as mostly a Great……*Dane*.”

The trooper lifts an eyebrow. “Big fella’, then.”

“Oh, *yeah*,” Will scoffs, adjusting his scarf. “He nearly crushed me the other day, actually.”

The trooper nods. “I had one growing up.”

“Ah. Yeah, great dogs.”

“Yeah… Too bad they don’t live long.”

“Yep…”

An awkward silence befalls them.

“Uh…” Will quickly glances over his shoulder again. “Well, I’d let you meet him, but…he’s actually pretty sick. Been on a lot of meds lately. Don’t wanna stress him out.”

“Sorry to hear,” the trooper says with a long sigh. “So you’re alone?”

“Yup, just me and him.” Will sucks in a breath. “This is actually sort of a one last ‘hurrah’ for the old guy.”

So if I can fucking go now…!

But *still*, the officer lingers. Will clenches his teeth behind closed lips.

“Wife didn’t want to come with you?”

Will blinks in confusion before abruptly remembering his wedding ring. “Oh. Uh…nahh. We’re kinda… Separated.”

Hands on his hips, the trooper exhales a long breath and shifts his stance. “I don’t mean to pry, but are you…ok?”

“Er, yeah.” Will shrugs, eyes darting around. “…m’fine.”

“I mean, the woods here are no joke, now. Plus we have a cold snap coming. Supposed to be the worst in decades.”

Will forces out a chuckle. “Thanks, but I’ve done a lot of winter camping around the Great Lakes over the years. Had great results ice fishing, too, so…I know how to handle a *bit* of cold.”

The trooper looks off to the side, working his jaw. “Alright. Well, you should know that a lot of folks go missing in these parts this time of year.”

Perfect.

“Don’t worry, as you’ve already seen, I think it’s safe to say I’m *well* prepared, so…” He fidgets. “If we’re all good, I’d like to get going before night falls.”

“Yeah.” With a sigh, he *finally* hands back the license and registration. “Looks like everything checks out, Mr. Lam, so I’ll let you be on your way—”

“*Great!*” Will immediately starts up the engine.

The trooper steps back. “Say ‘hi’ to, uh… What’s his name?”

“Who?”

“The dog.”

“Oh, Han—” His mind short-circuits. “—*cock*.”

The trooper quirks an eyebrow. “Really?”

Will cringes, wanting to die. “Yeah, wife named him. Y’know… Like John…Hancock…”

“Right… Well, say ‘hi’ to him for me. Give him lots of treats.”

Will beams madly. “Will do.” With a cheeky wave, he hits the gas and peels out.

The sky is a brilliant fiery red by the time Hannibal emerges from the bathroom and seats himself at the dinette.

Stirring a softly bubbling pot of beef stew, Will observes him from the corner of his eyes. “Took you long enough,” he remarks, ladling out two servings. “Thought maybe you passed out or something. One more minute, and I would’ve kicked down the door.”

He places a bowl and glass of water in front of Hannibal, who sits in a dazed state. After a moment, he nods. “I appreciate the concern.”

Will seats himself in front of him and begins to eat. “You getting worse?” he asks quietly.

“It’s going to get worse before it gets better. If it gets better.”

The last part looms over their shoulders like the shadow of a scythe.

Hannibal procures a small spoonful and slowly sips. “The stew is good, Will. Thank you.”

“It’s bland.”

“It’s *good*.”

Will huffs in exasperation. Appetite gone, he sits back in his seat. Fidgeting with his glass, he mutters, “It *hurts* to look at you.”

Hannibal keeps his eyes downcast as he eats. “Then don’t look.”

Will sneers. “And who once told me that ‘observing is what we do’ and that ‘I can’t shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off’?”

The corner of Hannibal’s mouth perks. “I’ve always admired the precision of your memory.”

“Of course.” Will smirks emptily. “My memory palace works well…when it’s not losing time.”

Nodding, Hannibal closes his tired eyes as he drinks. “Have you found yourself a river?”

“Yes, actually.” Will gazes at the closed shade. “I’ll show you tomorrow.”

Hannibal sets down his cup. “Will.” Head bowed, he briefly curls his hand into a fist. “Not tomorrow.”

Will turns and watches Hannibal pointedly avoid eye contact. “No—” He chuckles resentfully and shakes his head. “No, you can’t do that, you understand? You *can’t*.”

“I think it’s time we discussed this—”

“*Why* are you anesthetizing yourself?”

“Pain.”

Will stares, stunned.

Hannibal sighs. “I have reason to believe the infection has spread to my bloodstream.”

Will lowers his voice to a whisper. “Because of the ocean—”

“It may have happened anyway.”

Grimacing, Will presses his right hand over his eyes. He remains quiet for a long time, though his inner turmoil couldn’t be more deafening. When he finally speaks, his voice wavers along with his quivering shoulders. “We shouldn’t have survived. We shouldn’t— I thought… I just wanted—”

“Will.” Hannibal reaches across the table and rests a hand over Will’s left fist, which is pressed hard into the table. “Suicide is the enemy.”

“I *know*! I just—!” Trapped in a downward spiral, he looks away—at anything but Hannibal. Yet he doesn’t pull away from his touch. “I just wanted us to go *together*. Whatever that meant…”

“We’re together now.”

Sneering, Will sucks in a breath. “But it’s not *enough*, don’t you *see*? I need more *time…!”*

“It’s not yet terminal, Will.” Hannibal curls his fingers into Will’s grasp and holds fast. “Regardless, I would like to ensure that you’re prepared in the event of my death, whenever that may be. But I need to know your plan.”

“There is no *plan*.”

Hannibal studies Will’s face as he begins to brush his thumb across Will’s knuckles. “Then allow me to suggest one.”

He pauses, but Will doesn’t protest—he’s listening. So, with a wistful grin, Hannibal continues. “In addition to experiencing the sights of Florence, I would like you to see the world. Do not stop wandering until you’ve found yourself a place—a home.”

Will shakes his head. “*How*?”

“I have everything you need to start a new life. This is what you’ve been using thus far. It’s been in place since our ‘last supper.’” Hannibal sighs. “I used up my resources when I made my escape. Bedelia used a version of Abigail’s. …Yours is still available to you.”

Unconvinced, Will scowls. “I can’t build something from *nothing*.”

“That is why you have your memory palace. It is your home base, your foundation.” Hannibal tilts his head. “Tell me…what happened to your original river?”

“It’s gone.” Will faces the closed window and glimpses through the opaque shade.

Just beyond flows the lush, quiet stream. It’s forever autumn. A small figure casts a line. It goes far. He wants to commend her.

Yet his words will never reach her again.

Grief wells in his eyes. “I gave it to Abigail, my imago of her, and then I let it all go.” Bitter tears overflow and streak down his cheeks. “It was the only place I could make for her in this world…”

Hannibal nods. “Then you must find yourself a new one.” A tear trickles down the deep creases of his face. “…and it seems as though you have.”

“I did, and it’s *beautiful—”* Will sobs. A hand over his eyes, he weeps in a quiet, stifled manner.

When at last his anguish quells to a sufferable level, he vainly brushes the sorrow from his face and breathes deeply. “When you die, I’ll give this one to you.” He slowly closes his glistening eyes. “…and then I’ll truly be left with nothing.”

“I don’t need a stream, Will.” Hannibal places his other hand over theirs. “When I’ve gone from this life, you will always have our office, your house in Wolf Trap, the Norman chapel, the Uffizi—all of the places we’ve shared.”

“Just as you will when I’ve gone,” Will murmurs. Ever so slowly, he opens his stormy blue eyes and finally turns to face Hannibal. “…and I’ll expect to find you there, *victorious*.”

With unfathomable love and reverence, Hannibal tightens his grip and meets Will’s eyes. “As I have already found you.”

They lose themselves in silence.

Then, like golden daylight breaking through an endless squall, Will musters a frail, yet hopeful smile.

Hannibal reflects him.

After teaching Will how to prep IV lines and replace the bags, they lie side-by-side in the darkened bedroom. Will’s right hand is clasped over Hannibal’s left while they wait for the anesthetic to kick in.

“Are you sure you’re comfortable?” Hannibal asks.

“Yes,” Will breathes, staring at the ceiling and overhead cabinets. In an effort to stay calm, he tries to count the striations in the faux wood grain.

“Do not forgo pain medication just because you’re worried about me.”

“I’m not. It’s still sore, but it’s manageable. My neck too.” With a yawn, Will stretches a little. “I think I’ll go fishing tomorrow. Finally try out the new gear.”

Hannibal closes his eyes and grins. “…good.”

Blinking back the sting in his eyes, Will watches him drift. Then, after several minutes, he gets out of bed and returns to the dinette.

He opens the bench and picks out two boxes from beside Hannibal’s secret gift. The first is a smartwatch, and the second is a pulse oximeter.

Almost had your hooks in me, didn’t you dear…

Will hums as he cuts open the packaging and skims the instructions.

After setting everything up and syncing the devices, he returns to the bedroom. Standing beside Hannibal, he’s suddenly struck by a bit of whimsy. He clears his throat. “Hey. Hannibal.”

Silence.

Reassured, Will places the pulse ox on Hannibal’s right index finger and relaxes when the real-time measurements appear on his new watch.

“It’s a good thing you were out cold today, ‘cause holy *crap*… I bet you would’ve called that a Freudian slip.” Will chuckles as he configures the alert settings. “It was bad enough in front of that cop, but jeez, if you heard that……” He scoffs.

With another yawn, Will strolls back to his side and collapses under the luscious covers. Sighing, he closes his weary eyes and finally allows himself to be lulled asleep.

To his right, Hannibal mumbles incoherently.

“……

“……H’nnn……

“……

“……

“……

“……

“……c’ck…”

Will snaps open his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Phil Lam and his Great *Dane*…

The River Monster

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After making the conscious decision not to shave, Will exits the bathroom dressed in his usual flannel and jeans.

As expected, the dinette table is empty and there's no pre-made breakfast waiting for him in the fridge. Still, the confirmation leaves a dull ache in his heart. He quickly glances at his smartwatch, but Hannibal's vitals are fine.

After finishing a plain omelette and downing his antibiotics in stifling silence, Will sighs and wanders to the center console. Sifting through the tangle of random cords and chargers, he discovers a scuffed up iPod.

Holding the blocky thing, he scoffs. It's been years since he's seen one of these. He presses the center button and is shocked when the screen lights up.

Will quickly scours the cabinets and then the compartment over the cab. As luck would have it, at the very back is a speaker. Tugging it out of the pile of junk, he brushes off the dust and wipes the brass contacts. Then he places it on the counter, plugs it in, and connects the iPod.

A "connected" chime plays. Pleased with the sound quality, he scrolls to the full list of songs and selects "shuffle."

Will backs away to begin gathering up his fishing supplies. As he unboxes a hunting knife, he hears a soft, 50's-era beat strum up.

"Oh, the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear…

"And it shows them, pearly white…"

Will smirks, unsheathing the immaculate blade and admiring how the steel glints in the dim light.

For the first time, he permits himself to envision a life on the hunt, prowling the dark, dodgy streets. Both dressed sharp after a night out, Hannibal would be at his side while they walk in perfect stride down the sidewalk.

A particularly distasteful individual would shove their way through them. Hannibal's choice is set that very instant, but he looks to Will.

As the golden pendulum swings, Will would see, as clearly as the angel-maker once saw hellfire, the darkness lurking in that person's soul—the Red Dragons, the Randall Tiers, the Garett Jacob Hobbs'…

He'd see through their eyes, with their minds, from their skulls, and wholly understand why they did the things they did—beautiful in its own way.

Giving voice to the unmentionable.

That sprig of zest.

That quiet sense of power.

He tried *so hard* to get by on purely imagination. But a part of him always knew it would never be enough. In the simplest sense, Hannibal merely fast-tracked the process.

Most of all, he ensured that Will would not be alone in that darkness. Their eternally conjoined selves have elevated them above all other lone wolves.

Now, at long last, he's tasted the forbidden fruit.

…and lives the majesty of his becoming.

Will smiles. Upon the dark silver, he observes his reflection and the new scar therein.

Someday, perhaps, this teacup will come together.

…with fissures fused in gold.

With a flick of his wrist, the knife flips, spins, and deftly glides back into its sheath.

"Look out, ol' Macky is back!"

Misty rays of light shine through the branches and tree trunks. His boots crunch through dried grass and packed dirt, fishing gear softly clattering with each step.

After a five-minute stroll through the densely wooded trees, Will arrives at the bank of the stream. As opposed to the murky depths of his old stream, the waters are crystal clear and blend into vibrant turquoise at its depths.

A large gray stone, worn smooth over the eons, rests at the inner bend of the stream. He steps on top and sets down his gear.

Ancient evergreen pines tower all around him and rustle gently in the occasional breeze. He breathes in the sweet scent, filling the entirety of his lungs with crisp air, and exhales a wisp of fog.

Still feeling a twinge in his right shoulder, he decided to simply fish from the shore today. From a standard rod, he unfastens the small hook from the holding loop and skewers on a piece of thawed shrimp. With a red-white bobber and a few sinkers already attached, he opens the bail arm, draws the rod back, and casts.

The spool whirs as the hook flies out and plops into the water roughly thirty feet away. He closes the bail arm and reels in some of the slack.

Then he waits.

Freshwater gurgles as it rushes by, putting a subtle pressure on his line. Peering over the rock, he sees the silhouettes of tiny minnow-like fish schooling near the safety of the crevices.

Pursing his lips, Will reels in the line. When the hook finally breaks free from the surface, his suspicions are confirmed—the bait is gone, eaten away by the small fry.

Sighing, he takes a seat and decides to swap out the hook for a lure. He sifts through the tackle box and picks out a silver, minnow-like one.

After removing the floater and weights, he ties on the lure, draws back the rod, and casts as far as he can.

It lands about sixty feet away.

While steadily reeling it in, he twitches and flicks the rod to mimic the skittering movement of a small fish. But after a minute, the lure returns to him.

He plucks off the twigs and tries again. Yet after getting caught on a rock for several minutes, the second try also yields no results.

Scanning the water, he decides to aim for a deep, dark patch downstream. He judges the distance and casts. The silver lure glides and lands five feet beyond the drop-off.

He smirks.

Perfect.

He closes the latch over the spool and begins removing the slack when—

The line whirs as suddenly the end darts off to the right. Will gasps and hurries to pick up the slack. Then he pops the rod up and sets the hook.

Sensing the danger, the fish abruptly cuts left and toward the opposite bank. Within a second, the line goes taut, and Will quickly clicks down the drag to allow the fish to flee. But as the distance nears one hundred feet, he decides to fight back before the line runs out.

He braces his stance on the rock and begins tugging to the right. But the fish resists and keeps charging left.

“Shit, *shit!*”

With the rod nearly bending in half, Will’s arms begin to burn as he puts his body weight into the fight. As the adrenaline wears off, anxiety takes its place. He feels his hands break into a cold sweat as the fish continues to steal more and more of the underweight line. Before long, the spool is wound down to the last several feet.

Fuck it—!

Will jumps from the rock and races down the bank after the fish. He manages to pick up about ten feet of line when the fish starts to move back toward the middle of the river.

Will takes the chance and quickly recovers another forty or so feet before the fish senses the tension and flees upstream. He finds himself racing back to the rock.

Squinting through the reflections in the water, he tries to see what on earth this river monster could be. But all he glimpses is a large shadow.

His mind frantically skims through his internal catalog.

Definitely not a trout.

A salmon?!

No…

Striper?

Then the ripple in the water turns toward him. Heart in his throat, he carefully reels in only a tiny bit of the slack and creeps to the very edge of the rock.

"*C'mon*."

He squints through the dazzling glare. Then a ripple passes by, and he sees it.

Mottled spots line the giant serpentine body. With a crocodilian-like eye, it looks at him.

Suddenly, water bursts as the fish thrashes. Will snaps his eyes shut against the blast and slips backwards off the rock. As he falls, he hears the line snap, and the cut tension catapults the rod into his face.

He lands on his back but scrambles to his knees in time to see the monster vanish into the depths, the silver lure still hanging from its mouth.

"You should've seen it. I swear, it was *huge!* I mean, *enormous!*" Will passionately gestures out the size with outstretched hands. "Like *this big*!" He scoffs, shaking his head. "Never seen anything like it."

"The proverbial 'big one,' then?" Hannibal muses from his place on the couch. He rests slouched in the corner in a rare show of casualness.

The interior is cast in the warm orange glow of the setting sun.

Will returned in the mid-afternoon. In the absence of any fish, he had quite the tall tale to tell. Hannibal was still unconscious when he returned, so he decided to remove the pulse ox and

hide it, along with the watch, in the bench compartment. Then he left the screen door open so he could keep an eye on Hannibal while he put away his gear.

Hannibal awoke in the late afternoon.

At the time, he was too drowsy to pay much attention. Now he grins warmly at Will's frantic energy. He missed seeing him in this thoroughly amusing state. "And as the tale so often goes, it was the 'one that got away'?"

Will sighs loudly. "Yeah, but I'm not lying. Or embellishing." He runs a hand down his face before picking up the melting bag of ice and pressing it back to his right shoulder. "God, that thing was strong… I thought the rod was going to snap, but of course the line did first. I wasn't using the right weight. But how was I supposed to know something like *that* was out there?"

"Any guess as to the species?"

Will plops down into the dinette booth and contemplates. "Heh, I wanna say sturgeon, but *no*, this was definitely a pike. Northern pike. I think… It was spotted." He chuckles. "I've caught one of those before, but it was barely a two-footer. *This one* was pushing over four—maybe even *five*—feet." Still amped up from the battle, he grins wildly at Hannibal. "And I'm *pretty sure* that's not normal!"

"With great size, I assume, comes great age."

Will nods. "Yeah. This one has got to be really old. It was definitely smart. Wise. It knew how to give me the run around." He sighs, leaning into the backrest. "Obviously it's not going to fall for the same trick twice. I have to try fly fishing next."

"Once you give your shoulder a rest," Hannibal reminds.

Will pouts. "I know… I need to tie some lures anyway." He chuckles dryly. "Now that I think of it, you're not bad at fly-tying. Maybe you can help me out."

Hannibal makes a fleeting smirk. "Perhaps in a few days."

As darkness slowly obscures their vision, a quiet fills the space between them. With a grunt, Will rises and switches on the light.

"How're you feeling?" he asks softly.

Placing a hand to his bandaged stomach, Hannibal takes a breath. "I believe the next several days will be very telling. And as I mentioned before, I expect it to worsen before it gets better. Try not to be alarmed if my condition seems to deteriorate in the coming days."

Feeling the familiar chill of anxiety descend upon him, Will nods. "There anything I can do?"

Hannibal finally glances up and stares at him intently. "Actually, yes." With a soft grunt, he shifts to a more upright position. "Come closer, please."

Will pauses but walks over until he's standing just in front of him.

Hannibal's eyes are glued to Will's face. "Kneel."

At that, Will falters and furrows his brow. "…*Why*?"

"Will." Hannibal gives him an exasperated look. "I'm simply trying to check your stitches."

"Oh," he mutters, slowly and awkwardly lowering to his knees.

Hannibal reaches out with his left hand. Blinking rapidly, Will refrains from pulling away as Hannibal's fingers cup his jaw. He gently tilts Will's head to the side.

"How does it feel? Any problems with mobility?" Then his right hand reaches out to lightly brush the fading blotches on Will's throat, grazing the ridges of his windpipe. "Any pain here?"

"Um, no," Will murmurs, Adam's apple bobbing.

"Open."

Swallowing, Will's eyes dart about for a second before tentatively parting his mouth. Hannibal tilts Will's head up until the overhead light catches on the inside.

"Good. Close and smile for me."

Will immediately shuts his mouth. After a quick inhale, he draws his lips back in a wide, semi-crazed grin.

Hannibal grins back. "Excellent." He removes his hands, and Will's shoulders instantly drop. "You're healing nicely. I admit I was worried as to how this would progress."

"Worried that I'd be horribly ugly?"

Hannibal chuckles, and Will can feel the soft puffs of air on his face. "You will *always* be beautiful," Hannibal murmurs, voice nearly a rumble. Then he leans back a bit. "But, yes, I suppose I would like to prevent your disfigurement if at all possible."

Will scoffs. "Says the guy who *sawed* halfway through my *forehead*."

Hannibal sighs. "In fairness, disfigurement would've been the least of your concerns, had I not been interrupted."

Will glares at him. "Right…"

"In any event, I believe it would be best to remove your stitches."

Will pauses as he counts back the days. "Really? Already?"

"Yes, but only the outer ones. They'll be replaced with adhesive."

Nodding, Will rises to fetch the medical kit from the duffel bag. Upon handing it over, Hannibal picks out the scissors and tweezers. Will lowers in front of him. Turning his head, he notes that he could simply rest the side of his chin on Hannibal's knees. But he doesn't.

"Don't move," Hannibal murmurs, as he begins to snip away the sutures. Halfway through, it occurs to Will that Hannibal has not yet recovered from the slight quiver in his hands. But he manages to work steadily until the last of the stitches is gone.

Will counts ten.

Plastic crinkles as Hannibal opens a packet of adhesive and swabs it on the edges of the scar. He then places a row of six small plastic strips across it.

"These will remain until the adhesive wears off on its own." Hannibal pauses to take a sharp breath. "Wait at least fifteen minutes before washing your face or showering."

Will nods, discarding the used items and returning the medical supplies. "Well, I have to anyway, considering how long you always spend in there."

But Hannibal is silent, suddenly appearing quite ill. Will quickly walks back to him. As Hannibal braces both arms around his abdomen, Will places a gentle hand on the man's hunched back.

"Where?" Will murmurs.

"Bedroom."

Will stoops and hooks Hannibal's right arm over his shoulder. As they struggle to stand, thunder rumbles in the distance.

Will glances toward the dark window. But all seems clear for now.

Step-by-step, they gradually make the short trip to the bed.

Suddenly, a flash of white light floods the room.

Will blinks, and it's gone.

Within reach of the mattress, Hannibal withdraws his arm from Will and collapses onto his side of the bed. Straightening his back, he releases a long, shuddering sigh.

Will averts his eyes. "Pain?"

"Yes."

Looking at the IV bags instead, Will begins to gather the supplies from the cabinet. "Must be really bad then. I used to think you couldn't feel pain."

"I feel it as acutely as you do, Will." Hannibal breathes deeply. "I simply mask the external response."

Pulling on a pair of latex gloves, Will nods as he runs through the memorized instructions. "Like a wild animal. Show illness, and you're as good as dead."

"An easy meal…" Hannibal concurs, distant.

Somewhere halfway across the world, a wilted bird-of-paradise rests on a small tombstone.

Will lowers his voice. "You don't need to mask around me."

Eyes soft, Hannibal watches him. "I know."

With the initial preparations complete, Will goes silent as he concentrates on priming the tube and meticulously flicking out any air bubbles. Then he reaches over and flushes the cannula. After connecting the IV line, he pauses. "Did I miss anything?"

Hannibal grins and opens the cannula's clamp. Will inwardly kicks himself for forgetting that simple step. "Not bad at all. Perhaps medicine could've been your calling."

"Uh, *no*." Will chuckles as he then recalls to set the drip rate. He passes over a couple strips of tape, which Hannibal takes to further secure the line to his arm. "I couldn't handle that sort of environment."

"Understandable. Even I had to step away, though my reasons were *slightly* unconventional…" Hannibal smiles warmly. "Thank you, Will. I can finish from here."

Will nods, feeling a quiet sense of pride and satisfaction. He fetches some sleepwear, but when he reaches the screen door, he pauses. "Did you…?" He wants to ask about the lightning, but he trails off.

Then he mutters, "Never mind," and disappears into the bathroom before Hannibal can stop him.

Will lingers in the shower. He still hears a distant rumble. But something's not right.

He reaches out and turns the knob all the way down. In seconds, the pleasant warmth vanishes and biting cold strikes his skin. He gasps.

Thunder roars. *Loud*. Will squeezes his eyes shut.

He lifts his head.

Freezing drops pelt his face.

Someone's screaming.

No, *screeching*.

Tires.

There's a tone. It crescendos. Louder and louder.

The car horn blares. Blinding headlights engulf him.

They stop inches from his chest. Long fingers weakly claw at his ankles.

A man, *furious*, screams and shouts. A car door slams. He yells and hollers and then—

Nothing.

Will swallows iron. It won't stop pooling around his tongue. He lets some of it spill.

God, what a sight we must be…

Lightning flashes, and he strikes.

The man hits asphalt. Will's hands are at the throat.

Wind doesn't matter—*blood does*. It's faster. He presses—not down, but laterally—and endures frenzied thrashing until the man's efforts fall to nothing.

Will releases him, stands, but feels *nothing*. No sprig of zest. No power.

He's not dead.

...Hannibal.

Will rushes to the headlights, and there lies his monster.

He's not dead.

He kneels and throws an arm over his shoulder.

Thunder booms and rattles his heaving rib cage. His foot slips on the double yellow line. Every muscle quakes under the immovable strain. But Hannibal tries to help, and they rise.

One precarious step at a time, they walk.

White floods their vision. Just a flash. It's several at a time in quick succession.

Another crackling roar.

Will backs out of the shower.

The rain stops indoors. They fall to the floor. Will staggers to wobbling feet. He grabs a towel, but it won't stop. He presses so hard to the gaping wound, but the red just fucking soaks through.

M-Make it stop!

How do I—?!

Hannibal places a placating hand over his. But warm life keeps leaking through all of their fingers.

Go back, Hannibal mouths, thunder and seawater stealing his voice. It's all he can say.

Yet it's enough.

Will understands.

Huddled in the corner of the bathroom and clutching a towel in a white-knuckled grip, Will remembers.

He understood.

Chapter End Notes

Be the lightning in me
That strikes relentless

Important stuff happening in the next chapter.

Blood and Breath

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional CW/TW

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal opens his eyes. He listens, but all is quiet.

Blinking away the drowsiness, he reaches over and disconnects the IV line from the cannula. The bedroom is cast in deep orange. Long shadows stripe the bed and walls.

Hannibal scowls. This is the latest he's slept in. But as he reaches up to rub his face, he pauses.

He squints at the pulse oximeter on his finger. After eyeing it for a long moment, he removes it.

With a grunt, he sits upright and rises from the bed. He blinks the static from his vision as the stagnant blood in his legs is slow to reach his brain. But it clears after a minute.

Upon reaching the screen door, he pushes it open.

The interior is empty.

"Will?" he calls out anyway. To the right, the bathroom door is slightly ajar. He raps his knuckles on it twice before pushing it open.

Empty too. He steps inside. The shower stall and towels are dry. However, there's a slight sheen of water in the sink. Can't be more than half an hour old.

He washes his face. But as he dries himself, he looks into the mirror.

His bandage is gone.

He places a palm amid the mottled red on his bare abdomen. Uncertainty descends upon him. He thought he reapplied the bandage before going to bed last night, though the last several days sit hazily in his mind.

"Will?" he calls a bit louder this time, simply out of instinct, and slips a bathrobe over his shoulders. He fumbles to tie it on as he steps into the living space.

All of his fishing supplies are here—every rod and tackle box accounted for. On the dinette table sits the fly-tying kit. A half-finished fly is in the holder.

Now dread begins to set in, hastening his movements. He returns to the bedroom and hurriedly slips on a pair of boots.

Bursting out the side door, his eyes skim every direction of the darkening woods. “Will!” A layer of snow dusts every surface.

But there’s nothing aside from a biting gust rustling the thousands of branches.

Foggy breaths billowing from his parted lips, Hannibal winces and presses a palm over his aching stitches. The exertion thus far has already taken its toll, but he staggers onward.

As he traverses deeper into the forest, he races through his memory palace to find the corridor containing his last encounter with Will.

He opens the door.

Will was quiet. With sepsis ravaging his body, Hannibal was retiring to bed earlier as time went on.

It’s been three days since Will’s first encounter with the fish that excited him so. But from their fleeting moments together, it seems Will has not yet gone fly fishing. Will hasn’t smiled either.

Hannibal doesn’t know why.

He snarls. Were there more signs? Did he miss them?

Pushing himself from one tree trunk to another, he finally reaches the source of the freshwater scent.

Hannibal blinks. Will was right. This stream is stunningly beautiful. Crystalline meltwater rushes over polished stones. The towering, snow-laden pines frame the distant lavender hills to perfection. He sees a large, flat outcrop near the bend, which Will most definitely uses as his base.

He can almost see him there.

But he doesn’t. Will is nowhere along the banks.

I should have been there.

I should have…

Then he looks down, and in the fading light, he sees the prints of boot treads in the thin snow.

Heart racing, Hannibal stumbles after them as they lead upstream.

“*Please*…” escapes his mouth in a wisp. He clutches both arms to his chest. The freezing wind chills him to the bone yet mercifully numbs his agony. As the gentle stream widens to a dark river, he follows the tracks to another bend.

Water splashes, loudly.

Violently.

Hannibal runs.

Five hours earlier

Will slowly awakens to himself lying on his right side and cradling Hannibal's left arm, knuckles by his lips. Yet this comes as no surprise to him.

It's how he fell asleep last night.

With a deep sigh, he releases Hannibal and rolls onto his back. He checks his watch.

It's 2:37 PM.

This is the latest he's slept in so far.

He also sees that Hannibal's BPM is at 96 and his oxygen saturation is down to 93.

Will rests his forearm over his eyes and feels his own heart start to race. He takes several deep breaths to keep the looming panic at bay.

"I'm alright," Hannibal told him last night as Will helped him walk back to the bed. "Don't worry."

Turns out it was the worst thing for him to say, because it was exactly what he told Will after they fetched the duffel bag from the cliff house and right before he passed out and nearly bled to death on the floor of the RV.

"I'm alright. Don't worry.

"Go…"

Will sighs. After a few more minutes, he gets up.

And makes his decision.

He walks over to the duffel bag and retrieves the pair of scissors. Back in the bedroom, he removes the duvet and extra blankets from Hannibal. Even with the cold snap upon them and temperatures plummeting by the day, the stubborn bastard still insists on sleeping shirtless. The heater can only do so much, and it'll only be a matter of time before the generator runs out.

But it makes it all the easier now as Will slips the edge of the blade beneath the bandage and begins to cut.

Layer by layer, the white fibers split apart until finally, he reaches skin.

The air catches in his throat.

Marring the surface of Hannibal's abdomen are splotches of red—hemorrhagic rashes, a telltale sign of sepsis.

The smell of antiseptic hits him, and he recalls seeing this on his father's limbs before he passed. It wasn't supposed to happen. It was a complication. By the time he managed to fly out to the hospital, septic shock had already set in. Will sees his younger self sitting on a foldable plastic chair in the ICU.

He didn't cry. He just felt numb. When it was over, he flew back to his stuffy studio apartment and drank. And it was then, while horrendously hungover the next morning, that he realized the true extent of his solitude.

No one called in with condolences, however banal. He received no letters. He had no one to talk to or confide in. He didn't even have a dog back then.

He didn't know what to do or think.

So, he cracked open another beer and said "cheers" to an empty chair while "Alone Again, Naturally" blasted on loop, infuriating all of his neighbors.

Will scoffs as he closes the door on that discomfiting memory. To think he used to figure that *this* would be the lowest point of his life…

Turns out the goddamn Devil himself would help him reach even greater lows.

…and heights.

Beyond his wildest dreams.

Will sighs. After discarding the bandage, he returns the scissors and replaces the multiple blankets over Hannibal's afflicted body.

Sitting on the floor with his back against the side of the bed, Will takes Hannibal's right hand and, mindful of the cannula and pulse ox, repeatedly runs his thumb across the man's fingers.

"Well…" he says aloud, voice matter-of-fact with an undercurrent of snark. "Where should I sail to first on my *grand* world tour? …Greenland?" He muses. "I think Brazil could be fun. But I'd probably stop by Cuba first, check out Havana… Where do you think Chiyoh went?"

As he drones on, the part of him constructing this sad little room in his memory palace shakes his head and can't help but wonder if this isn't his new lowest low.

Bundled in a dark winter coat, Will strolls out into the snow. Hannibal is due to wake up in roughly half an hour, and Will wants to be calm during the inevitable confrontation. The last thing he needs is for the man to waste one of their last days together psychoanalyzing him.

So he makes a beeline for his trusty stream. Several minutes later, he reaches the soothing waters. This is the first time he's seen it dusted with snow. Standing on his usual rock, he takes in the gorgeous sight of crystal blue waters and the picturesque evergreen pines looking like something out of a Christmas card.

After documenting each sensory detail for safekeeping in his palace, he peers into the cobalt depths in vain hopes of catching a glimpse of his river monster. But of course, there's nothing in the empty waters. All of the fish would be in a state of near-torpor anyway.

Something does catch his eye, however.

A thin line.

Crouching, he squints through the rippling reflections and sees his fishing line fluttering in the current. He removes his bare hand from his pocket and, after a moment's hesitation, reaches into the freezing water. He winces at the shocking cold, but his fingers pluck out the line. Standing, he tries to pull the rest of it out, but the other end is stuck.

He steps off the rock and follows the line upstream and around another bend. As he walks, the stream widens out to a deep river. A sheet of ice has formed along the banks.

The tips of dark waterlogged branches poke out of the slushy ice. The water churns near one of them. He walks closer to the quivering wood and sees a flash of orange. A striped fin breaches the surface.

Stunned, Will races over but stops at the end of the bank. On a large branch about fifteen feet offshore, the giant pike twists near the icy surface. The silver lure is still stuck in its mouth and attached to a tangled mess of fishing line that's hopelessly ensnared in the driftwood.

Will curses. Of course, he didn't think to bring his hunting knife. But he wonders how he'd even reach the fish anyway. He scours the area for a long enough branch. Tugging one potential candidate from the snow, he tries to extend it across the ice. Yet it's a few feet short.

Frustrated, he tosses it into the river and pauses when he sees the ice stay together. Returning to the edge of the bank, he tentatively leans one foot onto the ice. It crackles slightly but holds.

Sucking in a breath, he lowers to his hands and knees and cautiously begins inching out. As he nears the fish, some patches of thawed ice sink and snap under his weight. But he's so close.

Will quickly flicks the frigid water from his hands. Then he flattens to his stomach and drags himself along. At last, the fish is within arm's reach, and he stops.

The breath catches in his throat.

The creature is magnificent. Rows of countless stretched spots line its elongated body and contrast with the darker hue of its hundreds of scales. Its black striped fins are tinged bright orange like a tiger's pelt.

Most strikingly of all, it stares directly at him with a large, almost reptilian eye. Huge gills flaring with each labored "breath," the large mouth repeatedly opens and closes from exertion.

Ever so slowly, Will reaches out. When his fingers brush the smooth scales of its side, the pike weakly writhes but stills a moment later.

And Will knows that it's done. He could simply pull it from the water, and it wouldn't fight him. The fridge would be filled to the brim with meat that would feed them for weeks.

And yet…

"Too long in the bottle," he said with a cheeky grin.

Will soon wiped that off his smug face when he stepped from the shadows and showed Hannibal what he had in his hands.

"How would killing me make you feel?"

"*Righteous*," he hissed, causing Hannibal to flinch. At the time, he was so *sure* it was an act. But now…

"Aren't you curious, Will? Why you?" he asked. So *infuriatingly* calm. "Don't you want to know how this ends?"

Will charged forth until the barrel grazed Hannibal's temple. He cocked the hammer. He was so ready. So certain. This was right. He *hated* him. He *hated* him so fucking *much*.

…he thought.

But it wasn't hate. He realized this when he met Peter Bernadone… *That* was hatred. Will envied it. Because it would've been so *easy*.

Then Hannibal tenderly held the side of Will's face and, with a soft smile, leaned in close.

This was……

Interest.

Intrigue.

Allure.

An *ache*.

It's…

“Aren’t you curious…?”

Will slowly runs his fingertips along the powerful body.

“Why…you…?”

Because…

He feels the fissures cracking beneath his stomach.

“Who holds the Devil, let him hold him well…”

His hand stops at the base of its skull.

And I did.

Its large amber eye watches him as he tightens his grip.

…Didn’t I?

Then he reaches out with his left hand to grasp the lure.

When I told him…

When I finally told him that it’s…

And tugs.

…beautiful.

Ice shatters as the hook slips free.

At once, freezing water—so cold that it burns—swallows him whole, and his body seizes. His muffled scream bubbles from parted lips, and on his tongue—

The taste of iron and salt.

Crashing through ice and concrete, Will sinks headfirst into the roiling Atlantic. Arms and legs dangling above him, he lies suspended in this dark limbo.

He doesn’t move.

Doesn’t breathe.

Deeper and deeper, his ears ache under the increasing pressure.

Yet he wants to stay. Here. Drifting. Forever.

It’s so quiet.

Peaceful……

But all too soon, his suffocating brain pleads—*begs*—for his straining lungs to breathe.

But he *can't*.

The moment he does, the peace will end.

He fears the pain.

Why couldn't it be *painless*?

Why am I awake…?

Then, without his permission, his legs kick out. His arms reach, fingers claw…

His mouth gasps and sputters at the surface. All around him, the waves roar and crest. As he's swept away, he sees the rock wall a second before he slams into it, his bleeding right shoulder taking the brunt of the impact. But his fingers manage to hook onto the jagged surface.

Choking, coughing, and clinging to the battered rocks at the base of the cliff, the cruel realization finally hits him.

He's *alone*.

Squinting through the darkness and the stinging deluge, he searches. But he's not here.

No…

No…!

Breaths hastening, he gazes wildly at the churning black water. Then he sucks air into every last corner of his lungs and dives.

His legs kick off the rocks and propel him through the abyss. His fingers reach around blindly.

He knows it's hopeless.

He knows…

But he keeps going, digging his grave ever deeper.

Then, lightning flashes. And in that blessed split second, light floods the sea and reveals a shadow suspended in blue.

Lungs screaming for air, he kicks and paddles toward it. But everything is pitch black once more. He flails in the vicinity.

Then the side of his knee brushes something. He bends down and fingers sink into fabric and muscle. Will snakes his arms around until his hands lock behind Hannibal's back. Hannibal's head leans into the crook of Will's neck as Will kicks hard for the surface.

Toward the rippling moon.

Will gasps frigid air. The sea roars once more. But Hannibal is silent.

Will's next breath is a sob as he hugs the heavy, limp body and kicks for the shore. Swallowing and hacking up seawater, he knows he has to hurry. But it's so far. He's not going to make it.

It's too late…

After an eternity, Will's feet hit sand. He tries to push off of it and only sinks deeper. But a rogue wave shoves them forth onto the beach. Hands sinking in sopping quicksand, Will struggles to his feet and hooks his arms beneath Hannibal's armpits.

Grunting and shouting the whole way, Will pulls until he trips and falls onto his back.

It's too late.

He crawls to Hannibal's side and tries to check for a pulse, but his fingers are shaking too much. He's so cold. He tries to press an ear to Hannibal's chest, but he can't hear past the crashing waves and heaving of his own chest.

It's too late, yet he overlaps his palms atop Hannibal's sternum and pushes. His right shoulder screams in protest, yet he aligns himself at a steeper angle and pushes harder. Again and again.

29…

30…

He tilts Hannibal's head back, clamps his nose shut, and presses their cold mouths together. As Will tries to force air into him, he's brutally reminded of the wound in his cheek. He breaks contact to cry out and seals his palm over the gash. Then he takes another deep breath and tries again.

He sees Hannibal's chest slightly rise.

Again. He gives him another breath before returning to compressions.

Break ribs, he knows. He tries to lean in harder, but his shoulder won't let him.

It's not enough.

Not enough, echoes snidely in his mind as he reaches another thirty and tilts Hannibal's head back. Their lips meet, and he breathes into him twice.

Again, nothing.

But Will doesn't skip a beat as he begins a third round, and then a fourth.

On the fifth, tears fall unbidden from his eyes.

“You fucking *liar*!” he shouts during compressions.

Six.

“You can’t fucking *leave me*!” He’s screaming now. They rip from his burning throat. “You *can’t*!”

Seven.

Will’s entire body is shaking. He’s no longer pressing deep enough. He can’t even speak amid his hyperventilating.

He knows…

Eight.

His feeble compressions stutter to a stop. He sits, panting.

Not without me…

He doesn’t make it to nine.

Too exhausted to cry, Will cradles Hannibal’s peaceful face with his hand and leans in until their foreheads touch.

Please.

Will bursts out of the icy river and clambers onto the pebbly, snowy bank. Water spills off of him in solid lines.

His watch is alarming.

Zero.

Zero.

Gasping, he yanks off his waterlogged coat and stumbles into the woods. But he can’t stop shivering and trips. His numb hands scrape against gravel and then splintering bark as he drags himself upright.

As he leans against the tree, tears tracing scalding paths through the unfeeling cold, he hears something approach.

Footsteps.

Hannibal rounds the bend, eyes wild. Will blinks, hardly believing his own eyes as he stares at the crazed man dressed in only a bathrobe, sweatpants, and ill-fitting boots.

In the fading light, Will pushes himself off the tree and staggers toward the apparition. Holding out his right hand, he hesitantly and fearfully closes the space between them.

He wonders if any of this has been real.

…or if he's still bleeding out in the sand, comatose and clinging to a corpse.

Hannibal takes a few steps forward.

Then, just as they're merely an inch apart…

Will remembers.

—that he didn't give up. He tilted Hannibal's chin, sealed his nose and the gash in his own cheek…

…and tried one more time.

The moment Will's fingers graze Hannibal's solid shoulder, he surges up and locks their lips together.

Warmth…

It's real.

It's real—!

Will's hands fly up to rake beneath Hannibal's silky hair and pull him closer. Hannibal then perches his fingers beneath the sides of Will's stubbled jaw and feels each strain of tendons and undulation of muscle, and through it all, the exhilarating rush of blood. Soon, the ravenous collision melts into something slow. Easy.

Tender.

No forts.

…for the one you love.

Their foreheads touching and noses overlapping, Will finally breaks the kiss to brokenly gasp, "*We're alive.*"

He feels Hannibal gently nod. His hot breaths billow over and between their lips.

Blood…

Breath…

Radiance…

Life.

Will breaks.

His legs give out, and Hannibal goes with him.

They fall.

Will's knees hit the sand.

And he's there on that beach, lying on his stomach with an ear to Hannibal's heaving chest. Listening to the raspy breaths and pounding heart, he wants to say something—now that he's been granted this most precious of second chances—but he can't stop crying.

They need to leave, but his broken body won't move.

Yet he manages to slide his quivering hand to the gaping wound near Hannibal's stomach. He's too weak to apply enough pressure, but he tries anyway.

As more tears slip from Will's dazed eyes, Hannibal shakily lifts his hand and places it over Will's.

Within that simple touch is strength.

Reverence.

Love.

Hannibal holds on, and Will believes, for the first time that night—as thunder rumbles on the horizon—that they're going to make it.

They will survive.

Chapter End Notes

▶ Them, basically:

Hopefully these two can learn to live and thrive now.

The Wedding Ring

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They argued on who should shower first—Will, who was entirely submerged in freezing water, or Hannibal, who was severely underdressed and had a compromised immune system from battling his blood infection.

Of course, each was vouching for the other, and as they wasted time volleying rhetoric and reasoning, they inched ever closer to hypothermia. Eventually, while both shaking like a leaf, they could hardly form coherent words amid chattering teeth and blue lips.

That's when Will stormed into the bathroom and turned the shower on full-blast. With the heat turned all the way up, Will grabbed Hannibal and shoved him bodily into the shower. But as he turned to leave, Hannibal clamped his hand around Will's upper arm and yanked him into the stall.

So there they stood, face-to-face and fully clothed, snarling and griping under the scalding spray. But before long, the undeniable pleasantness of thawing out under steamy water managed to temper the worst of their petulance.

Once defrosted, they went their separate ways to peel off their soaked clothes, towel off, and slip into warm sleepwear. Hannibal finally agreed to put on a long-sleeved shirt, and so Will agreed to wear long pants.

Within half an hour, they were seated on opposite sides of the couch, sharing a blanket, and sipping on their preferred leftovers—Will, the silkie chicken in a broth, and Hannibal, the beef stew.

A silence concerning the day's events looms heavily between them.

Finally, Will can no longer stand it, and after a particularly loud slurp, he says:

"You ever watch the *Odd Couple*?"

"The what?"

"It's a 60's movie, and then they made a TV show, and then another movie… But I never watched any of those… And, um…… Forget it."

As he chews a cube of beef, Hannibal lifts his brow at this desperate attempt at small talk. He swallows. "Are you insinuating that we're now a couple because we've kissed?"

Expression neutral yet tired more than anything, Will shrugs and looks away. They fall into silence again, but after several spoonfuls of soup, Will mutters, "Have you…seen any Tattle Crime articles lately?"

Hannibal muses as he chews. “Not since we left Italy, though I appreciated the updates on your recovery.”

“A big black box…” echoes her derisive voice in Will’s mind, and he flinches.

“*Uh*, well, anyway…” He practically buries his face in his bowl as he eats. “She’s been posting somewhat *salacious* articles on us. …Called us ‘murder husbands.’”

Hannibal blinks. “And how does that make you feel?”

Will sassily lifts his brow. “How does that make *you* feel?”

“I find it vulgar—”

“Me too.”

“—*and* entirely plausible.”

Eyes wide, Will pauses his frantic eating. Then a genuine chuckle escapes his mouth, and he leans back into the couch, laughing and laughing through a closed smile.

Beaming, Hannibal laughs as well. They finish their meals in amused silence.

“Are we gonna talk about it or what?” Will blurts out a bit too quickly. He still avoids eye contact yet keeps his tone even.

Hannibal trades his empty bowl for a mug of tea from the adjacent counter. “I don’t know. It depends…” He lets the steam waft into his face before taking a sip. “Am I your psychiatrist right now, or are we simply having a conversation?”

Will scoffs. “For a second, I almost forgot you were my psychiatrist.” He absentmindedly sifts through the leftover broth in his soup. “I used to think you were a pretty *shit* one too… until about five days ago…when you finally did your goddamn *job*.”

Hannibal’s expression sobers at that. “Did I really?”

Will sighs. “Yes.” He glances fleetingly at Hannibal. “It’s not what you think. I went out on the ice because that fish was tangled on a branch. I think I was able to free it before I fell in.”

Hannibal nods, slightly more at ease. “Well, I’m glad to hear.” He takes another sip. “Shame about the fish. I would’ve liked to try my hand at cooking pike.”

Will scoffs. “Sure, but not that one. *Please*.”

Hannibal smirks. “It’s not my say anyway. The waters are solely *your* hunting grounds.”

“Not forever. I’m going to teach you fly fishing one of these days—” Will freezes.

Hannibal merely observes him for a moment. Then he nods. “I look forward to that.”

Hurt, Will finally looks at him. “Do you?”

With a small smile, Hannibal sets down his mug. “I realize that I have no evidence, but what you saw today is actually an improvement. If I were to be perfectly honest, my state was most critical last night.”

Will glares from the corner of his eyes. “I know, you told me that *damn lie* again…” He sighs, hesitant to hope. “How long have you had those rashes?”

“Since the day I warned you it was going to get worse before it gets better.”

Will nods, feeling numb. “Figured as much…”

“Don’t stress yourself, Will. Today is the first sign of the infection’s regression. After quite the steep climb, it should be a downhill battle from now on.”

“Really?” Will asks, though he already believes. He can hear the strength returning to Hannibal’s voice. For once, it’s not a mask. “Your vitals weren’t great this afternoon.”

“Check again tomorrow. Barring a relapse due to our little romp in the snow, you should see a significant improvement.” Hannibal smirks for a millisecond as an idea dawns on him. “But if you’d like immediate proof, then I believe my fever has finally broken. However, I could use a second opinion…”

“Well, I forgot to buy a thermometer—” Will glances over only to find Hannibal grinning smugly. After a pause, Will lowers his brow. “Oh.” He spitefully stays put, but Hannibal waits him out.

After several minutes of Will‘s fidgeting increasing in frequency, he finally caves. With a deep sigh, he reaches over and smooths his palm over Hannibal’s forehead. Hannibal closes his eyes at the touch.

An ache in his chest, Will looks on. It took him the better part of a year to somewhat process the trauma of what he currently deems the “Kitchen Nightmare.” Now he’s deeply haunted by how close he came to killing Hannibal on the floor of the RV at 4:43 AM, after fighting *tooth and nail* to drag that man out of all nine circles of Hell.

Then again, Hannibal later nearly strangled him to death, so…

Reciprocity.

Will finally removes his hand. “Still a little warm,” he mutters.

“Primarily because you lingered for so long,” Hannibal remarks as he retrieves his mug. “Regardless, you must admit there’s been a marked improvement.”

Will turns away. He sets down his bowl of soup and leans his elbows on his knees, fingers interlocked in front of his mouth. “Yeah. Sure.”

Hannibal eyes him. After a long moment of silence, he determines that Will is requesting to be prompted. So he takes a breath. “Is there something else on your mind?”

“I remembered,” he answers at once, voice grim. “Not everything, but…” With a thousand-yard stare, he massages his mouth and stills.

Hannibal nods solemnly. “I was rendered unconscious the moment we impacted the Atlantic. Depending on your definition, you could argue I was dead.” He sips the last of his tea. “I was certainly under respiratory arrest…until I awoke with your breath in my deluged lungs.”

Then Hannibal lifts his eyes and follows Will’s line of sight all the way back to the beach.

The scent of salt in the air, he approaches the lone figure standing in the sand. Some patches are still upturned and marred with dark stains, drag marks, and uneven footprints.

They’re wearing the torn up, bloodstained clothes of that day, but their skin is clean, stitched, and steadily on the mend. Will has his hands in his pockets as he looks out to the infinite horizon. Tonight the skies are clear and thus adorned with countless flickering constellations. The tamed ocean flows in and laps gently at their ankles.

“Did you dream?” Will inquires, eyes on the edge of the world.

Hands clasped behind his back, Hannibal’s eyes are on the stars. He pinpoints Polaris. “I’m hesitant to call it a dream, but I did experience something in the space between.” With a fond smile, he turns to face Will. “As I always hoped, I saw my end in my beginning.”

Eyes closed, Will abruptly takes a sharp breath and, as a harsh whisper, asks, “Did you *see* what I *did?”*

“No, but I was with you.”

With a resentful scoff, Will buries his head in his hand. The other is curled into a tight fist at his side. “Well, it *really* didn’t *feel* like it!”

Somber, Hannibal shifts his stance and sighs. “Oftentimes, we put out signals and receive nothing in return. It can feel like shouting into the void. But that does not necessarily mean no one is listening.” Hannibal’s eyes are fixated on the center of his vast, yet isolated universe. He smiles sadly. “I was listening, Will.”

“Then prove it.”

Hannibal takes a breath. He holds it in his lungs for a moment before finally saying, “By any chance, did you say ‘please’?”

Will freezes.

“…No,” he murmurs. Then he drops his hand and lifts his head to look at Hannibal. With glistening eyes, Will gifts him a warm, yet coy grin. “But I *thought* about it.”

With a small smirk, Hannibal tilts his head. “How intriguing.”

Will breaks eye contact and sighs. “Well, I’ll keep in mind that your disembodied soul can *apparently* hear my thoughts.”

Hannibal nods. “And as for this place, let it be known as another one of our shared spaces. Though dare I say it’s the most sacred one of all…” He turns and slowly strolls over to the patch of stained, churned sand. “For here, the lamb became a lion, and his wrath alone made your worst possible outcome an impossibility.”

Will stops beside Hannibal and stares at the place where he once kneeled. “The one where I lived and you died?”

“Yes.” Hannibal closes his eyes, genuinely unsure if he could have pulled off such a feat had the circumstances been reversed. “That is the hand you were dealt in this world, yet you denied it by rending Heaven and Hell to reclaim my soul. When I was revived here, I realized what you had done…and what you were yet to do.”

Will huffs and rubs the back of his neck. “Well…it was a *long* night.”

Opening his eyes, Hannibal chuckles. “And you’ve yet to remember it in its entirety, correct?”

Although exhausted, Will lets out a dry laugh, “Hey, one thing at a time, ok?” After a moment of listening to the gentle rippling of the sea, he outstretches his hand. “C’mon, let’s not make *this* night a contender.”

Hannibal takes it with gratitude. Will drapes Hannibal’s arm over his shoulder and they walk, though this time their posture is less of a combat carry and more so of a drunken couple merrily bumbling their way home.

Will awakens to bright sunlight flooding the bedroom. Blinking the sleep away, he turns to his right and finds it empty.

He gets up with a start and hurries to the screen door. Just before opening it, he hears faint grunting from the other side. Brow furrowed, he slides open the door.

And there is Hannibal, in only shorts, with his entire body coated in a sheen of sweat, on the floor with one hand behind his back as he effortlessly completes a one-handed push-up.

Will stares.

Hannibal glances up. “Ah, Will.” Somewhat out of breath, he rises to his feet and grabs a towel from the dinette. “Good morning. I was just finishing up.”

Still stunned, Will nods as he watches Hannibal wipe the beads of moisture off his face. “Are you…” He swallows. “Uh…supposed to be…?”

Hannibal takes deep gulps from a glass of water. “I’m still reliant on painkillers, but I feel able-bodied enough to do just a little exercise.”

“Right…” Will says with a quirked eyebrow. “Well, no rush.”

But Hannibal gives him a “look.” He opens his mouth to say something but then decides against it.

Will scowls. “Ok, no. Don’t do that. Just *tell* me.”

Hannibal drapes the towel over his broad shoulders. “I heard a helicopter just after daybreak. Distant, but it will only be a matter of time before we’re sighted.”

Will freezes. “Why did you tell me to use up the fuel? We still have some left, we should move—”

But with a knowing smile, Hannibal shakes his head. “There’ll be no roads where we’re going.”

Will blinks. Unsure how to respond to that, his eyes drop to the short row of stitches amid the spot of raised, scarring skin near Hannibal’s stomach. The splotches have faded to small speckles of red amid the wisps of hair. Being bedridden has thinned down his muscle mass somewhat, but he only seems to be several days’ worth of hearty meals from recovering the lost weight.

Hannibal disrupts his thoughts by turning away to refill his glass. “Now if you’re done ogling, I’d like to finish while you get yourself situated. Unless, of course, you’d like to check my vitals…”

Will glares daggers and disappears into the bathroom, the door slamming shut behind him. Through the thin walls, he can hear Hannibal chuckling.

As he wipes off the excess cold water from his face, Will eyes himself in the mirror.

…Two can play at this game.

Oil sizzles on a frying pan. Amid the delicious smells of cinnamon and savory seasoning is a hint of acrid smoke.

Will grins evilly as he completes his final pull-up. Dropping to the floor with a huff, he removes the bar from the doorframe and shoves it back into an outside compartment. Then he enters the RV and grabs his bottle of water from the counter. As he noisily drinks, he lets a few drops slip from the corner of his mouth and drip onto his bare chest. He finishes with a sigh.

“Eggs are burning.”

Clad in long pants and a sweater after his workout shower, Hannibal flinches and finally refocuses back on their brunch. A spatula scrapes frantically as he tries to salvage what used to be a rather gourmet-looking omelette. Will watches smugly.

“This will be yours, then,” Hannibal mutters, scraping the charred food from the pan and dumping it into a plate, which already contains a slice of French toast. Will takes it with a cheeky nod of thanks.

After turning off the stove, Hannibal retrieves his pristine serving and seats himself at the dinette. Will does as well, still in only athletic shorts and appearing fairly sweaty. Petulance at an all-time high, Hannibal glowers as he cuts off a piece with perfect knife and fork etiquette.

Will smirks as he saws with the side of his fork. “Y’know,” he begins in between mouthfuls, “when Bedelia told me that you apparently find ‘nourishment’ at the very sight of me, this isn’t quite what I had in mind.”

Eyes downcast, Hannibal sips from his water. “And did she, by any chance, call you a ‘righteous, reckless, twitchy little *bitch*’?”

Will nearly chokes. He quickly swallows and continues eating. “More or less…”

Hannibal smirks. “I figured. She would call you that often.”

Will sifts his food around. “Why am I not surprised…”

Hannibal chuckles. “Am I to understand that you sought therapy from her?”

Will sighs, slicing off the burned bits and pushing them to the side. “I wouldn’t quite call it ‘therapy.’”

Hannibal nods. “Part of the reason why I decided to bring her to Europe was so that we could continue our sessions. I used to find her insight quite helpful.” He sighs. “Unfortunately, she changed after seeing me without my person suit, and our talks in Italy culminated in me buying a bone saw.”

“What was the other reason?”

“Sexual gratification.”

Will freezes as something inside him breaks and shatters into a million pieces.

Hannibal merely continues chewing, as if he just mentioned something about the weather. “Does that upset you?”

“—*I don’t know*.” Will tosses down his fork and massages his aching temples. “Anyway, how did you find out I got married?”

“Alana.”

“And…?”

This time, Hannibal stills. He lifts his eyes to glare darkly at Will’s wedding ring. Then he sets down his utensils. “Why are you still wearing that?”

“So it upsets you.”

Hannibal tsks. “It’s the same as when you kissed Alana Bloom and slept with Margot Verger —a clutch for balance and nothing more. I still don’t understand what you were thinking when you chose Margot, or how you were so easily duped into impregna—”

“—*Ok*, that’s enough,” Will snaps, headache worsening.

“You still didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

“Your wedding ring.”

Will wearily lifts his eyebrows and lowers his hand from his forehead to look at it. He sighs. “Well…”

Hannibal’s mouth twitches in a half-snarl. “After everything we’ve been through, you’d still humor the thought of going back?”

“Now wait—”

“I only gave you the option before because I knew that version of you was not the one who resuscitated me. But now you’re telling me it makes *no difference*? What is it about *lawfulness* that entices you more than the darkness you so *obviously* delight in yet *insist* on repressing time and time again?”

“Han—”

“And how many more times are you going to be drawn by this reckless righteousness, only to change your mind at the very last second? First the phone call, then your ‘forgiveness,’ and now the hole in your face because you spent too long gloating at me being shot when—”

“Hannibal!” Will’s fist slams on the table, causing their plates and drinks to jolt. Hannibal is unfazed, but he pauses to glare at Will, daring him to explain.

At last with a chance to speak, Will exhales loudly and runs a hand down his face. “…… it’s stuck.”

At once, the fury drains from Hannibal’s face. He blinks. “What?”

“I *said* it’s *stuck*.”

Hannibal sits, frozen. After a long moment, he finally shuts his slightly agape mouth. Will remains with his elbow on the table and a hand over his eyes.

After rapidly blinking several more times, Hannibal pushes his empty plate to the side. “Let me see.”

Will shakes his head. “I’ve already tried everything. I’ll just have to get it cut off later.”

Hannibal holds out his hand. “Let me try.”

But Will immediately flinches away and clutches his left ring finger. “What? *No*.”

“Will, I’ve had to remove rings in the ER before. Besides, you’re likely not using enough force.”

Still holding his left hand, Will stands. “Uh, no, I’ve definitely used *plenty*.”

Hannibal stands as well. “*Give me your hand*.”

Furious, Will begins backing up toward the open side door. “I *told* you I *tried* everything already!”

“I’m not going to break your finger, Will,” Hannibal says as he takes several ominous steps forward. “*Let me see*.”

Will sneers. “Yeah, *right*! I bet you’d be happy to chop it the fuck off!”

“I’d do nothing of the sort.” Hannibal pauses. “But don’t tempt me.”

“That’s it, I’m out.”

“*Will.”*

Will sprints out the door, and Hannibal, to the best of his ability, races after him.

Although both barefoot in the thin layer of snow, they end up getting quite the workout running laps around the RV before Will manages to dart back inside and lock himself in the bathroom. While he braces against the door from within, Hannibal throws himself at it several times before finally collapsing to the ground, out of breath and in need of more pain meds.

The ring wasn’t removed that day, though Hannibal certainly tried, much to Will’s dismay. Eventually, they settled on a truce—a promise that, upon reaching their new home, cutting off the ring would be first up on their to-do list.

…Second would be tracking down Bedelia.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, the duality of the murder husbands…

“I have an unconventional *physical therapist*.”

“Well, we have that in common.”

Bluebird

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will awakens to the sound of rumbling. Alone, he immediately shoots upright and clambers toward the window. Eyes to the overcast sky, the beating propeller roars louder and louder until it must be directly above them, but he can't see it through the opaque white.

The turbine screeches deafeningly, as if it could crash into them at any moment. Heart in his throat, Will's sweating hands grip the windowsill as he watches the blank sky.

Then the wailing dies down along with the thundering blades. The rumble fades into the distance.

Silence befalls the forest.

Heart racing, Will collapses back into bed with an arm over his eyes. Once his hyperventilating is under control, he launches back to his feet and whips open the screen door.

"I don't think they—" The words catch in Will's throat. He blinks. "They……"

At the dinette pulling a scarlet thread taut, Hannibal sits clad in a khaki vest, fleece jacket, and waders. With a small pair of scissors, he clips the excess and runs his index finger along the fly's striped feathers. Then he sighs and glances over to Will.

"Well?" Hannibal asks, removing the lure from the holder. "Are we going?"

"Back stroke. Pause. Front stroke."

A bright orange line glides through the air and delicately lands upon the water's surface.

"Use the weight of the line for momentum. Keep your motions smooth. Try not to flick your wrist. Nice and easy follow through."

The spool whirs as he reels in the slack. Now donned in his fly fishing attire plus a gray cap, Will looks toward the bank. "Your turn."

Minus the cap, Hannibal cautiously sets foot into the rushing water. Step by step, he wades into the quiet of the stream.

"Watch this patch, it's kind of slip—"

Before the word can fully leave Will's mouth, Hannibal abruptly lurches backwards as his foot slides out from beneath him. At once, Will grabs his arm and pulls him upright before his upper body can contact the water.

"—pery."

Hannibal glares at him. "And how many of these fly fishermen met a watery grave when they were inevitably swept away?"

Will rolls his eyes. "Just don't go out during a flash flood. Now here." He shoves the rod into Hannibal's hands. "I've already set the drag for you. With your left hand, pull out about twenty feet and then cast."

The reel whirs as Hannibal tugs out some excess line. But instead of casting, he pauses and then begins reeling in.

Will frowns. "What are you doing?"

"It was 22.8 feet."

He holds back a scream. "Ok, enough. Just cast already."

Hannibal shoots him another look before drawing the rod back *way* too fast. With a gasp, Will barely manages to duck in time as the line whips around and catapults forth.

"What the *hell*, you almost took my eye out!" He slowly rises back up, adjusting his cap. "For God's sake, Hannibal, it's not a whip!"

Hannibal scowls. "But the line went far, did it not?"

"We're not going for distance right now." Will crosses his arms. "Be gentler next time. Now reel it back in, but not all the way. Keep about twenty feet of the line out."

With an exasperated sigh, Hannibal repeats the setup and draws the rod back. With much less force, he swings the rod forward.

Will purses his lips and nods. "Alright. Better. …But you got a little stuck on the back swing. Watch the line next time."

Hannibal sighs louder as he reels in. "Forgive me, Will, but I fail to see the appeal of tossing a fishing rod back and forth."

Will narrows his eyes. "Hey, I put up with all that medical IV jargon. Now it's your turn."

Hannibal pulls out the slack. "That 'jargon' was necessary life-sustaining information. Failure to follow each step in its entirety would've resulted in catastrophic complications—"

"Ok, just cast!"

Again, the line sails through the crisp air.

"Less wrist next time," Will notes.

Hannibal glowers as he reels it back in.

“And what are you saying?” Will interjects. “This skill is what’s going to prevent us from starving to death over the next few days.”

Hannibal tugs out another round of line. “It’s inefficient. Why can’t you just set a rod on the bank overnight and let the fish catch themselves?”

“What?” Disgusted, Will shakes his head. “Where’s the fun in that?”

Hannibal is silent as he tosses forth the rod.

Will perks up at the sight. “Hey, that was good. See? You’re already getting the hang of it. Now remember how that felt.” He unhooks their scarlet lure from his vest pocket. “Reel it in so I can add the fly.”

Hannibal is annoyed to find that his anger is somewhat placated by the praise. He draws the rod up so that Will can catch the line’s end.

Will threads the clear line into the hook’s loop. “Use a clinch knot.” He holds out his hands so that Hannibal can see. After twisting the overlapped end five times, he threads the loop and pulls. Then he grabs a pair of wire cutters from his pocket and snips off the excess.

With a sigh, he releases the hook. “Ok, now whatever you do, *don’t* stab me in the eye. Don’t take out your own eye either. Otherwise I’ll never stop laughing at you. Ever.”

“I suppose that’s motivation enough,” Hannibal mutters as he pulls out the slack and carefully draws it back. On the forward swing, the scarlet fly glides through the air and lands about 25 feet away.

“Wow, good cast.”

Again, Hannibal stamps down the well of pride. “Now what?”

“Nothing. Just let it hang for a bit.”

They watch the line drift in the current. After a minute, Hannibal exhales through his nose. “I still fail to see the appeal.”

“Relax, will you? Fishing is 99 percent patience.” Will sighs. “And I thought you’re all about staking out your prey. Weren’t you waiting around Freddie’s place for over five hours once?”

Hannibal’s upper lip twitches. “Even if it was all a ruse, I would’ve appreciated if you called me off earlier.”

“Well, I *kind of* had my hands full…” Will mutters a bit sheepishly. “Ok, reel it in and try again.”

The fly skitters back to them. Hannibal sets back up and casts. It lands in a shady patch near the opposite bank.

“Nice, good placement.”

This time Hannibal makes a fleeting grin. “This seems to require a lot of luck.”

“I guess…but having good technique can really enhance the luck.” He chuckles. “There’s also superstition.”

Hannibal lifts his brow. “Such as?”

Will fidgets. “Well, there’s the one about naming the lure…” He rubs the back of his neck. “Some people believe that you should name it after someone you cherish. If that person cherishes you back, you’ll catch the fish.”

Amused by such silly notions, Hannibal smirks. “And if the fish swims off with the lure?”

Will rolls his eyes. “I don’t know. Then that person will never find ‘true love’ and shall be cursed for *all eternity.*”

“Then, for your sake, I hope you tied it on well,” Hannibal quips. He lifts his hand to the spool when suddenly Will reaches out and stops him.

“*Wait*.”

Now alert, Hannibal follows Will’s line of sight. But he can’t make anything out through the rippling reflections.

“He sees it. Wait…” Will murmurs, eyes laser focused on the water near the fly. Then he removes his hand. “There. *Pull*.”

The next second, the orange line lifts into the air and goes taut. Adrenaline floods Hannibal’s veins as he hurriedly tugs and begins reeling.

Will beams as he watches the rod bend and fetches the net from the holder on his belt. “Don’t panic. You got him.” He laughs. “This one’s feisty!” Water splashes as he wades toward it. “Bring it here!”

Hannibal dips the rod to the right. He shifts his stance so that his feet catch on the stones as he struggles to steer the fleeing fish. Hands in a white-knuckled grip, he carefully increases the tension until he senses the line about to break.

Will quickly lunges forth and scoops at the churning water. “Got it!” Then he gasps. “Oh, *look*! Look!” Laughing ecstatically, he lifts the net with both hands to reveal a black-dotted fish with a dash of vibrant pink down its side—a rainbow trout, nearly twenty inches long.

When Hannibal smiles back, he doesn’t realize that he’s showing teeth.

“To think, only two weeks ago, I was stressed out of my mind wondering how I was going to catch up on my retirement funds, help save for Walter’s college tuition, and provide for seven—no, eight—no, *nine* dogs—on a boat handyman’s salary…” With rosy cheeks, Will hiccups as he chuckles. Wine glass in hand, he sinks deeper into his corner of the couch.

On the dinette table is a large platter of picked-clean fish bones. The delectable scent of their dinner still lingers in the air.

“Turns out all I had to do was elope with my filthy rich, cannibal ex-boyfriend… Isn’t fate *hilarious*?”

Still fairly sober, Hannibal smirks from his end of the couch. Legs crossed and wine glass in hand, he’s aware of the exact volume and intervals of alcohol to consume in order to maintain the desired buzzed state. He’s also aware of how much it would take for himself to get completely inebriated.

Out of the need to maintain control, he rarely lets himself cross that line. The last time he merely got tipsy was when the two of them shared a glass of this same brand of wine—when Will, an unstable, standoffish, encephalitis-ridden mess of a man, accepted his unconventional request to be friends.

Now fate and circumstance have returned them to this moment, where, with each additional sip of the pink liquid, Hannibal ventures ever further beyond his self-imposed limit.

The occasion couldn’t be more fitting, however, now that it is their first night free from the constraints of their medications.

Consequently, it’s also their last night at the RV.

After Hannibal popped the cork, smelled every note of the complex heady aroma, and poured both of them a glass, Will was hellbent on making a toast.

“I want you to say ‘cheers,’” Will told him, somewhat shyly. “It would mean a lot.”

“Very well,” Hannibal agreed.

With an eager chuckle, Will tapped his glass to Hannibal’s. “Cheers. To surviving.”

“Cheers,” he echoed, grinning. “To surviving the wrath of the lamb.”

The smile that appeared on Will’s face was one that Hannibal would cherish forever.

“And honestly, me disappearing is the best thing that could’ve happened to them,” Will continues to ramble on. “I looked them up with Liam Graves’ phone, and guess what? So, they had a GoFundMe set up after Francis attacked them, but after *I* disappeared—and she released that message over the news and everything—they raised over *$200K* and counting! And, um…” He giggles. “…I *may* have donated a thousand bucks… But she probably won’t get it, right? ‘Cause the cards are fake? But it’s the thought that counts…”

Hannibal listens on, completely endeared by this new side of Will. At first, when he noted the ever-increasing times Will asked for a refill, he worried how emotional and unhinged their night would become. But Will is simply cheerful and chatty when drunk. Relaxed too. Now that his repressive filter of self-consciousness is out of service, it’s as if the floodgates have opened, and the words flow freely from his mouth with surprising clarity.

And complete honesty.

“How crazy is that, right? I know it’s not millions, but it’s better than nothing. I certainly didn’t have anything of worth for them to inherit, and you can *forget* about any life insurance, but at least I didn’t pass on debts like how my dad did to me.” He muses. “Maybe I wasn’t such a bad father after all…”

Hannibal opens his mouth to finally speak, but Will suddenly cuts back in.

“Oh, and get this.” He scoffs. “I’d be curious to check in on Walter in six or seven years, ‘cause we may not be related, but that kid actually might have a bit of darkness in him. A chip off the ol’ block.”

Hannibal raises his brow. “A potential protégé?” He takes another sip. “Or…perhaps you’re looking to gain full custody rights?”

Will smirks. “I don’t know about that… But no, I couldn’t do that to Molly. He’s all she has, besides the dogs.” He fiddles with the single drop left in his glass, tilting it back and forth. “Still, I’d be curious to check in on him.”

“Stop by his high school graduation, perhaps?”

Will cackles. “Perhaps. But don’t kill any of his friends, like you did to Abigail. I don’t care how rude they are.”

Hannibal sighs, doubtful he can promise that.

Will rolls his eyes and holds out his glass. Hannibal’s gaze flicks over to the mostly empty wine bottle. Only a fifth is left.

“I’m sorry, Will, but you’ve had quite a lot already. I can only hope you don’t have a hangover tomorrow.”

With an irritated huff, Will throws himself back into the couch. “Fine, fine… But I’m not even drunk. …Right? Do you hear me slurring my words? Hey, I bet I could pass a sobriety test. Watch—” He gets up with a start, much to Hannibal’s alarm, and immediately begins to sway.

Hannibal jumps up and grabs Will before he topples over. With arms firmly wrapped around the front of Will’s chest, Will leans heavily in his grasp.

“Huh, guess not… Weird…” Will murmurs, head resting below Hannibal’s chin.

Hannibal chuckles as he manages to retrieve Will’s wine glass from his loose fingers. “Time to call it a night?”

“What? No.” Will squirms halfheartedly. “We have time, right? …Like that song?” He wearily closes his eyes and begins mumbling and somewhat humming, “We have all…the time…in the world…”

Hannibal grins as he lowers Will onto the couch. After setting Will's feet on the opposite end, he grabs a blanket and drapes it up to his shoulders. Will merely lies limply on his side, facing the dinette. Blinking slowly, he murmurs, "Talk to me."

Water runs as Hannibal cleans their wine glasses. "I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that song."

"What?" Will's brow furrows, and he scoffs. "And you call yourself 'cultured'… It's a classic! Louis Armstrong. James Bond…" Eyes closed, he smirks. "I feel like you'd make a good Bond villain."

Hannibal smiles as he dries each glass. "Perhaps in another life, though I'd prefer not to be regarded as a 'villain.'" Then he returns them to a cabinet and takes a seat in the dinette booth across from Will.

"He had finally found the love of his life, and they'd just gotten married when……"

With an elbow leaning on the table and a hand to his chin, Hannibal watches him. "Are you still talking about the movie?"

With a sharp breath, Will opens his eyes halfway. "It's like finally finding a bluebird—one I've been searching my entire life for. So many years *wasted* already… And now I see it. Within reach, at last. But I fear getting too close. Once it flies away, I'll never find it again… So for now, it's there. And we exist…*precariously*…" Will takes a shuddering breath. "Yet, I'd never cage it."

Hannibal nods, now understanding the reason for Will's incessant drinking. "Would you rather not have found it at all?"

Will sighs deeply. "No… Of course not. It's the only difference between my past and future."

"Before you. After you."

Will chuckles dryly. "And 'God only knows what I'd be without you'…" He slowly rolls onto his back and drapes his forearm over his eyes. After a moment, he says:

"Over thirty years of memories just blur together, like ink running from doused pages…each notable moment condensed down to a topic sentence…that runs into the next." Will pauses. "And yet, the page where you show up…it's not even a page. I see every frame. It's a room, and I see every detail, hear each word and inflection… I know exactly what you wore, what foods you cooked for me on what day, every touch…"

Will swallows the lump in his throat. "And Molly, poor Molly… I can't even remember what we last had for dinner. I couldn't tell if she'd worn a certain outfit before. I can't remember what day I took her son fishing. I'm not even sure if I can remember the names of every dog I've had…" The corner of his lips briefly perk. "But I'll never forget Winston… Good boy…"

Hannibal leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. “Precisely. Do we not pay more attention to that which intrigues us? Is the utmost important to us? Those decades of tedious moments in my life…they exist yet lay dormant in a filing cabinet, completely out of sight.” He takes a sharp breath. “There is only one other person besides you who freely roams my palace’s corridors, but I have not seen her for quite some time…” Eyes soft, Hannibal lowers his voice. “I think she hides from me, terrified and appalled at what I’ve become.”

“I don’t hide from you…do I?” Will asks, still with a subtle, innocent lilt to his voice.

“Never,” Hannibal answers with a smile.

Will nods. Then he finally lowers his arm to stare at the ceiling. “If your memories are so vivid, why do you feel the need to draw?”

Hannibal pauses for a moment, lost in thought. “Fair question. I suppose it helps keep me mentally alive—like exercising is to the body, lest one’s muscles waste away. I find satisfaction in depicting worlds that I’ve been to…and creating some that I wish could exist.”

“Curious about these other worlds…” Will suddenly takes a sharp breath and turns away. “Hey, do me a favor. Where you’re sitting, swing up the bench.”

Hannibal raises his brow before rising and lifting the seat cushion. Inside is a rectangular box, about three inches thick, neatly wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. He picks it up.

“Go ahead. Open it. We’re not waiting for Christmas.”

For once at a loss for words, Hannibal unravels the bow and unfolds the paper.

“Now if you don’t like it, don’t take it out on the clerk,” Will rambles while rotated toward the couch’s backrest. “She was actually really helpful. I just figured it’d be too obvious to buy your favorite brand of pencils…not that it really mattered in the end, but…”

Hannibal opens the thin-walled cardboard box. Amid the shredded bits of white tissue paper is a black leather-bound book, a porcelain palette, a small glass jar, four tubes of paint, and several brushes of varying styles.

“I don’t know how familiar you are with gouache, but apparently a little goes a long way. She said a lot of people paint on-the-go with it. It’s also water-soluble. Resoluble, even.”

Hannibal sets the box on the table.

“You can even go light to dark and dark to light, whatever that means. The paints are supposed to be really high quality. Imported from Japan. I know you seem to like stuff from there. I was going to get more colors, but I didn’t know which ones you’d want. Apparently, you can make almost any color with just those four…” Will trails off when he finally notices the silence.

Perplexed, he begins to turn when suddenly Hannibal plants both hands on the sides of his face and kisses him. Will stares wide-eyed for a moment before attempting to reciprocate.

But his reactions slow to a half-second delay at best, so Hannibal draws him into a hug instead. From his place kneeling beside the couch, he tightens his embrace.

“Thank you,” he whispers into Will’s neck, fingers buried in his hair and supporting the back of his head. “*Thank you*…”

……for everything.

Will nods, lips drawn in a faint, relieved smile. “Thanks for going fishing…” he murmurs. “Now show me what you can do with color.”

“With pleasure. And *you*—” Hannibal releases Will and, feeling giddy, quickly returns to the dinette table. “—would make an excellent model.”

Will wrinkles his brow. “What? Me?”

“Certainly.” Hannibal fills the small jar with water and seats himself. “I’ve long hoped you’d model for me one day.”

Will scoffs. “So should I strip?”

In the middle of applying paint to the palette, Hannibal pauses. “If you’d like.”

To his surprise, Will seems to genuinely consider it. But after a moment, he winces. “Uh… maybe later. When it’s warmer out…”

Hannibal smirks as he dips a pointed brush in water and begins blending out secondary and tertiary colors, followed by beige skin tones.

Will yawns as he watches Hannibal work. “You want me to pose or something?”

“No, as you are is fine.”

“I might fall asleep.”

“Go ahead.”

With a fleeting grin, Will closes his half-lidded eyes. Hannibal reaches over and dims the lights until the brightest are the ones directly above the couch. They cast a warm, soft glow upon him and tinge the edges of his skin and tousled hair with brilliant gold.

As if they have all the time in the world, Hannibal flips to the first page, blocks out his composition, and then meticulously begins capturing each detail with vibrancy and care. Instead of going for photorealism, he keeps his brushstrokes somewhat loose, with the focal point being Will’s face and the precision honed in on the subtle emotions hidden within his reposed features.

Worry, uncertainty, stress, exhaustion—all present yet kept in check by a baseline of comfort, relief, hope, and…

Happiness.

Even if only on paper, Hannibal creates a world which deserves to exist. He paints in deep blue until a bird is formed. Free and uncaged, it nestles beside the sleeping man, here to stay.

Chapter End Notes

And so, they brought color into each other's lives.

Also, bluebirds.

…not to be confused with "Blue*beard*."

Wayfinding

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will stands before the gates to Hell. He watches one fiery column flare up nearly two stories high before fizzling back down to the inferno's center. Jet black smoke billows and blends into the night sky.

Hannibal stops beside him. Will glances over and observes how the flickering blaze casts deep shadows upon his sharp features. Sparks of embers gleam in his shrouded, sunken eyes.

"Hello, Satan."

The Devil smirks and politely tips his head. "Good evening." Then he turns back to the fire. "Well, I think that should do it, don't you?"

Will lifts an eyebrow. "Sure."

"I'm glad you decided to spare enough fuel."

"I mean… At the time, this wasn't *quite* what I had in mind."

"Nonetheless, if you're bothered by the thought of someone else salvaging our personal effects, then I can think of no better way of remedying the problem."

"Oh, *yeah*." Will nods emphatically. "People went nuts when the FBI auctioned off your stuff. Everything was gone in minutes. I think I once saw your favorite suit listed on eBay for a million bucks."

The corner of Hannibal's mouth twitches. "*Well*, we should certainly pay that pig a visit one day."

Will smirks. "One day."

The ground scrapes as Hannibal stoops to slip on his backpack. Will helps him adjust the heavy load before heaving on his own backpack and securing the straps. Then, without any ceremony, Hannibal begins walking into the dark forest.

After hesitating for a few seconds, Will turns and follows. Their footsteps crunch through the packed dirt and fallen pine needles. He catches up to Hannibal's side.

"Are you sure this isn't going to start a forest fire or something?"

"Yes," Hannibal answers curtly. "The moisture from the thawing snow will prevent the leaves and bark from catching. The RV will burn itself out in roughly two hours."

"Speaking from experience?" he asks snarkily.

Hannibal doesn't respond. Although Will can't see it in the darkness, he knows that Hannibal has a smug grin on. Will draws the flashlight from his coat pocket and clicks the switch.

"Actually." Hannibal stops. "I'd prefer if you kept that off."

Will quirks his brow. "What? Why?"

"It's interfering with my night vision. Besides, it's a full moon out. There's already plenty of light."

Hannibal continues on. With a loud sigh, Will puts away the flashlight. He stumbles blindly after the sound of Hannibal's footsteps, but after a minute, the ground dimly fades into view. He can make out the black silhouettes of tree trunks ahead and the light colored stones amid the darker fallen branches below. Hannibal walks several paces in front of him. Before long, Will can even see the shadows cast by the moonlight.

He catches up to Hannibal's side.

"See?" Hannibal asks knowingly.

Will huffs at that special word.

Soon, the sound of gurgling water grows louder as they near the stream. Will spots the rock he would always stand on. For the final time, he steps on top.

The dark water ceaselessly flows past his feet. Will stares and hurriedly commits everything to memory—the crisp smell of midnight air, the black spires of trees, the gleam of moonlight in the rippling surface, and even the residual taste of coffee on his tongue.

Hannibal steps up on the rock and documents the sensory details as well. After a long moment of nothing but the sounds of rustling leaves and water, he asks, "Where would you have buried me?"

Will blinks and breathes deeply. "I *wouldn't* have." Shifting his stance, he shoves his gloved hands into his coat pockets and curls his fingers into fists. "From dust to dust… I would've cremated you…well, *tried* to… And then I would've stood right here and scattered your ashes into the stream."

"So that no one could exhume me? Dissect my brain or perhaps display my corpse in a museum?"

"Yes."

Hannibal nods, satisfied with the concept. Then he smirks. "Would you not have kept even a single part of me?"

Will chuckles. "I don't know. Maybe." He lifts his head to look at the thousands of stars. "I guess I would've eaten your heart… And if you weren't so *big-headed*, maybe I'd keep your skull. Then I'd find myself a white sandy beach and sip Mai Tais out of it."

“I can think of no better use,” Hannibal remarks lightly.

Will laughs and turns away. “C’mon, let’s go.”

Together, they hop off the weathered stone and follow the water upstream. When they reach the river, Will scans the bank for the tangled fishing line. He spots the clear thread in the pebbles and pulls the ensnared driftwood out. With his hunting knife, he cuts until none of the plastic line remains. He bundles it into a single wad and stuffs it into an empty pocket in his backpack. Then he picks up the silver lure and returns it to the empty slot in his tackle box.

All the while, Hannibal sits at the base of a tree and sips from his water bottle. Will walks over and joins him. “I wish you could’ve seen it,” he mutters. “The pike.”

Hannibal smiles. “I’ll be sure to look for this behemoth in our shared spaces.”

Will nods. “Let me know when you find it.”

“Of course. When I do, I shall paint it.”

Will grins. “Now *that* would be *something*…”

Upon finishing their water break, Will pushes himself back onto his feet and helps Hannibal up.

“Where to now?” Will asks, dusting the dirt and twigs from his pants.

“Northeast is our trajectory,” Hannibal replies as they venture farther into new territory. “Tell me, Will, did you use the stars when you sailed the Atlantic?”

“Hell no!” Will cackles. “I used GPS, of course. But…” He glances up. “I do know a little.”

They cross into an open field. Moonlit grass sways in silver shimmering waves. With each step, the tree line gradually disappears behind them. Will sighs as he gazes deep into the vast night sky. The last time he saw this many stars was out on the open sea. Alone.

Hannibal stops beside him.

“Well…” Will begins, craning his neck. “There’s the Big Dipper, Ursa Major, which means…” His eyes trace out the imaginary line along the ladle’s outer edge. “Somewhere here-*ish* should be the North Star.”

Hannibal watches expectantly as Will’s eyes squint and scan the plethora of flickering dots.

“Um…… Oh, *there*.” He raises his hand and points. “Little Dipper. So…yeah, it should be that one on the end.”

Hannibal follows his line of sight and smiles. “Well done.”

Will grins. “One of the few things I remember from Boy Scouts. But that’s all I know.”

“And yet, it’s all you need. Once you find Polaris, you can find your way.” With that, Hannibal turns approximately thirty degrees to the right and marches on.

Will lingers at the center of the field to stare into the infinite expanse of the universe. The stars, planets, and galaxies—all incomprehensibly distant and timeless compared to their meager existence.

And you did see them too.

Will’s eyes land on Orion and, near it, Jupiter.

With a pensive smile, he turns toward Hannibal and hurries after him.

Side by side, they cross the sea of grass.

Will awakens to dappled sunlight on his face. Ancient pine trees tower above him and gently sway. Blinking the sleep from his eyes, he stiffly rises off his backpack and checks his watch —not the smartwatch but the one of his dreams.

Oh, the looks he got when he, dressed as Liam Graves, waltzed into that Breitling store and cheekily smiled at the security guards and high-rolling patrons…

He realized too late that he had forgotten to ask Hannibal about a spending limit. Fortunately, the designs of the astronomically expensive watches didn’t appeal to him anyway. So, he settled for one that was more “modestly” priced.

Half an hour later, he strolled out of that store with a spring in his step and ten grand strapped to his left wrist.

11:16 reads his silver-blue aviation watch.

“So much for a quick nap,” Will mutters and glances over his shoulder. With his head on his backpack, Hannibal sleeps curled up on his side, almost like a cat.

Will rises with a groan, legs sore and feet aching. After a quick stretch, he fetches their empty water bottles and his water filter.

Through the row of trees, the sun sparkles white upon the deep blue. His footsteps crunch through dried grass and gravel as he steps onto the rocky bank. Squinting through the midday light, he scans the lake for any signs of life before kneeling to scoop up some crystal clear water.

After securing the filter, he squeezes the first batch into his own bottle and looks at it skeptically. But at the very least, it seems clean of any debris. So with a shrug, he takes a tentative sip.

There’s the faintest bitter aftertaste, but it’s not bad at all. Encouraged, he drinks some more and fills Hannibal’s bottle.

Back at their clearing, he sets up a small gas stove and begins boiling a pot of water. With a sieve secured over a titanium mug, he sprinkles in some coffee grinds and pours in the steaming water.

Hannibal's eyes finally open at the smell.

Will grins warmly at the disheveled man. "Mornin'."

With tufts of hair sticking up on the right side of his head, Hannibal slowly pushes himself upright and notes their shadows, or lack thereof. "We overslept."

After letting some steam waft over his face, Will takes a careful sip. "Yeah, well… What did you expect? We must've walked like twenty miles already."

"17.3," Hannibal corrects, rubbing his face.

Will sighs, feeling fatigued just thinking about it. "Whatever, just give me your mug before the water goes cold."

Hannibal rises to his knees and unzips his backpack. "In my younger years, we could've easily surpassed 25 miles." He fishes out his cup.

Will rolls his eyes as he takes it. "Sadly, we're not exactly spry twenty-year-olds, now are we? Not to mention how we nearly died two weeks ago…and you, *again*, last week. It is what it is." After the last of the hot water drains through, he detaches the sieve and hands over the mug.

Hannibal thanks him. "Two weeks…" he murmurs as he breathes in the dark liquid. "That's right, I need to remove the last of your stitches."

Will pauses. "Right now?"

"May as well, now that it's bright out." After a sip, he sets down his mug and pulls out the medical kit. "Lean back against the tree here."

With a sigh, Will makes his way over and reclines against the bark. After wiping his hands with sanitizer, Hannibal kneels beside him and tilts Will's head to the right. His thumb runs along the line of raised skin amid the stubble. The adhesive strips finally fell off two days ago. Will blinks several times at the touch.

"How fortunate that the cut was made near the upper edge of your beard. It's actually not too noticeable." Hannibal removes his hand. "Even more miraculous is how you seemed to have escaped nerve and muscle damage."

Will briefly smirks. "Strangely, it *has* been getting easier to smile…"

Hannibal grins back. "I wonder why…" Then he tilts Will's head the other way. "Open. And try not to bite, as you are wont to do."

Will lifts his eyebrows at the visceral memory of sinking his teeth into Cordell and then the sight of Hannibal's enthralled, proud reaction. Will was certain that he was going to die horribly that day, and so if that was the last time he saw Hannibal, at least it could've ended on that note.

Nor did Will truly realize what a difference having no anesthesia makes until Cordell started slowly and deeply slicing into him. In contrast, he didn't even realize that Hannibal was sawing into him until he noticed some kind of dark liquid pouring down his face.

My dear ethical butcher…

Will opens his mouth and makes the conscious effort to keep his tongue out of the way. Mercifully, Hannibal starts at the back and works quickly. With the removal of the tenth stitch, Will finally snaps his teeth shut and exhales the breath he was holding.

"How the hell did you manage to put these in?" he asks, flexing his jaw. "Oh, local anesthetic, of course…"

In the middle of putting away the supplies, Hannibal stills. After a few seconds, he continues until everything is back in its place. Then he picks up his lukewarm mug of coffee and slumps against a nearby tree.

Will is suddenly struck with pangs of remorse and melancholy as he looks at Hannibal's weary face. He stares in uneasy confusion. "What?"

"We didn't have any left." Hannibal takes his time sipping from his coffee.

Frowning, Will grabs his own mug and sits back down. "Of local anesthetic?"

"Regional and local." Hannibal gazes listlessly at the ground in front of him. "At your insistence, we used all of it for my procedure. When it came time to address your wound, you requested that I do it without anesthesia." He blinks slowly as he swallows. "But I refused. Perhaps we could've managed on a superficial cut, but doing so on an injury as grievous as yours, on a facial wound no less, would've been unbearable."

Will feels his heart begin to thunder in his ears. He lowers his voice. "Then what?"

Hannibal sets down his mug and clasps his hands over his bent knees. "Then…… I told you that I was going to prepare an antibiotic injection. Instead, I filled a syringe with an anesthetic intended for deep sedation." He takes a sharp breath. "While your back was turned to me, I administered it to your neck. You reacted immediately and fought me off." With a deep sigh, Hannibal closes his eyes. "You didn't lose consciousness right away. We had 38 seconds."

Will massages his mouth as he stares at Hannibal. "Why are you telling me this? I thought you wanted me to remember on my own."

Hannibal opens his eyes, still facing the ground between them. "You'll likely never remember this part. But you deserve to know… You did so much for me that night…and I

betrayed you."

Will shrugs. "Well, you did what you had to."

Hannibal tilts his head as he hesitates. "Will… In those 38 seconds, I gave you my word… that I would heal you… Then, I held you and said my goodbyes."

Silent, Will watches as tears well in Hannibal's downcast eyes.

"You were opposed to taking the anesthetic because I informed you of the risk of incurring amnesia. Often, only a few minutes are lost. Sometimes, it's a day… There was no way of knowing exactly how your memories would be affected or what the potential long term effects would be."

Hannibal closes his eyes once more.

In this forbidden room of his palace, he sits alone on the bathroom floor, clutching this figment of Will to his chest and repeatedly stroking the back of his head. This Will's fingers claw into the front of Hannibal's clean shirt, and his gnashed teeth hiss curses and hatred into Hannibal's neck. Then his righteous fury weakens with each passing second until his loose hand falls away. By the 39th second, his body leans heavily and limply in Hannibal's grasp. All is quiet, except for Hannibal's ceaseless murmuring of promises, apologies, and farewells.

"When you told me that you remembered pulling over to stop my bleeding, it gave me hope that the memories before that moment weren't erased for good…that you had only blocked those due to immense stress." With a faint smile, Hannibal opens his eyes. "Fortunately, that seems to have been the case. As you've discovered, memories lost in this manner are far more recoverable." Then he lifts his head to lock eyes with Will. "So here I am… Grateful to be reunited with this most precious version of yourself…and to know that I did not kill…'*you*.'"

Will grimaces as he runs his hand down his face. "For fuck's sake, *Hannibal*." He shudders as he inhales. "What if I forgot about saying, '*It's beautiful*'? Or us killing the Dragon?" He chuckles resentfully. "Saying, '*Please*?'"

Will rises to his feet. "Or even devising your *escape plan* with *Dolarhyde*?" His enraged voice raises with each question. "Do you *know* what I was thinking right before that happened? I was *thinking* of leaving you to *rot*!" He takes several steps forward. "Do you understand? When I said 'goodbye' that time, I *meant* it!"

"And when I said my goodbyes to you on the floor of that RV, I meant it as well," Hannibal interjects, holding eye contact.

Hands clenched into fists, Will squeezes shut his eyes. "Because you also knew that I would've *killed* you!" he snaps. "Had I forgotten all that, I would've killed you. And then I would've crawled back to my already failing marriage with my wife and nonexistent relationship with my stepson… And after the divorce, I probably would've started drinking

again, and then—" His voice fades to a quivering whisper. "…and then *what if,* after all that, I finally *remembered*?"

At last, Hannibal averts his eyes. He swallows the lump in his throat. "That is why my method of killing you became euthanasia." He turns away. "It did occur to me, had the worst outcome happened, that it would be kinder to spare you the suffering."

"But you *couldn't*." Will sneers. "Right, you *bastard*? …Because you *promised*?"

"I promised that I'd heal you… And I *always* keep my promises."

Lips drawn back in a snarl, Will buries his head in his hand. He stands rigidly, eyes covered and shoulders quaking, yet no tears fall and he doesn't make a sound.

Hannibal watches for a moment before gradually rising to his feet. He approaches Will and firmly locks his arms around his shoulders. Then Hannibal leans the side of his head against him.

"So *lucky*…" Will whispers as he silently weeps. "So damn *lucky*…"

Hannibal nods solemnly. "*Precarious*, as you mentioned."

"A-All of this. Everything we have. It all teeters on a knife's edge." He takes several shuddering breaths. "What's the *point* if you can't *hold on*?"

"But, as your 'many worlds' theory goes, is there not a universe in which everything ends well? No matter how unlikely the odds, that world must exist."

Will sighs shakily. "…I don't dare believe it's this one."

"Why not?" Hannibal gently strokes the eternally tense muscles of Will's upper back. "We've made it this far… And with each surpassed tribulation, does it not become more likely that a good world could be this one?"

With a tremor, Will slowly recites, "Everything that can happen, *happens*…"

"Therefore, you can never do wrong. It's only what you're supposed to do."

Upon hearing the familiar sentiment, Will's mouth eases into a faint smile. He slowly lifts his hands to grasp the fabric on Hannibal's back.

"Then I want to stay here for a little longer," Will murmurs. He sighs as he rests the side of his head on Hannibal's shoulder. At last, some of the tension leaves Will's body as he allows Hannibal to support him. "I regret not waiting at the top of that cliff…even for just one more minute…"

In the depths of his palace, a miraculous lightning strike illuminates the sea.

Will tightens his grip. "And yet, it *had* to happen that way."

Hannibal nods, closing his eyes. “Then allow this to happen as well.”

As the forest’s shadows gradually lengthen with the relentless passage of time, they stand locked in the other’s embrace, cherishing this fortuitous world they’ve landed in and the unfathomable odds it took to get here.

In the dry grass, their half-full mugs of coffee have long since gone cold, though it’s nothing a few minutes over an open flame can’t fix.

After hunger eventually convinced them to part, Will boiled more water for their rehydratable brunch of “scrambled eggs with bacon bits,” which Will found delectable and Hannibal deemed detestable. So, he implored Will to fish them a fresher dinner, and with such a picturesque sapphire lake at their doorstep, the fisherman couldn’t have been happier to oblige.

In return, Hannibal seated himself on a nearby log and added a new painting of Will to his book. Similarly, he couldn’t have been more eager to capture, via flowing brushstrokes, such a scenic view of his beloved.

Chapter End Notes

The RV’s owner certainly didn’t luck out in this timeline, but I’m sure he had good insurance…

“Cannibals carjack your RV and camp out in it for a while before burning it down? We know a thing or two because we’ve seen a thing or two.”

Ravenstag

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"After suturing your wounds, I placed you in the passenger seat so that I could monitor your breathing while I drove."

"How the hell did you manage that?"

"Putting you there?" Hannibal smirks inwardly. "Believe me, it was not…'elegant.'"

Will rolls his eyes.

It's the following day, and the midday sun beats down on them relentlessly. As they trudge up a slope, Hannibal leans against a tree for a water break. But when he tips his bottle, only a few drops trickle out.

Will sighs and draws his own bottle from the side of his backpack. "Here."

But Hannibal shakes his head. "No, keep it."

"*Take it.*"

Eyes narrowed, Hannibal grabs the bottle.

Will watches until he's sure that Hannibal is actually drinking. Then he checks his watch. It's 12:06. "Hold it for now. We'll fill up at the next lake."

At the top of the hill, Will finds a shady patch beneath a tree and slips off the straps from his aching shoulders. With a loud sigh, he drops into a sit and straightens out his burning legs. Hannibal does the same beneath an adjacent tree.

Will scans the endless landscape of pine trees. About two miles away is a break in the dense spires, signifying a lake, though it's smaller than the previous one. Flicking his focus back to the hazy horizon, he sighs at the distance yet to go.

The Atlantic is nowhere in sight.

Then he closes his eyes. Mercifully, a breeze gently wafts over his clammy skin.

Water splashes as Will steps into the chilly lake with his bare feet. The relief is instantaneous. In only swim trunks, he crouches and splashes several handfuls of water onto his face. Wiping the excess from his eyes, he cups another handful and runs it through his hair.

To his right, water sloshes as Hannibal, in only swim trunks as well, walks right in and dives. Will watches as the man proceeds to swim freestyle into deep water. Then he submerges his

entire body before abruptly resurfacing and tossing his head up. His hair whips back along with an arcing spray of water. The shower of droplets sparkle in the sunlight.

Will glares at the dramatic display. Wary of the cold, he gingerly dips the rest of his body in until only his head is out of the water. Then he reclines just beyond the bank. Hannibal positions himself into a back float.

With only the sounds of water lapping at their ears and rippling along the shore, they close their eyes and drift.

“I can’t believe he actually got you,” Will says after a while.

“Who?”

“My admirer.”

“Ah, yes…” Waves churn as Hannibal shifts to treading water. “Matthew Brown?”

Will continues to rest with his eyes closed. “I didn’t think he’d get that far, to be honest.”

“The possibility of you sending a hitman did occur to me, especially when you gave Lounds those interviews. But I thought there was no way it could be done under the scrutiny and level of security that you were in.”

Hannibal wades back to shore and grabs his towel from a nearby branch. “Hubris got the better of me, and I will always bear the scars as a reminder.” He smirks for a split second. “Fortunately, hubris *also* got the better of Matthew. He could have easily let me drown at the bottom of the pool.”

Will opens his eyes to gaze at the bright blue sky. He can see the unholy image that Jack described to him—Hannibal strung up by a noose, balancing on a bucket, sliced arms duct taped in a crucifix position, and his life slowly trickling down the drain. “Were you angry or flattered when you found out I sent him?”

“I was disappointed,” Hannibal answers matter-of-factly as he dries his face. “Murder by proxy is not very ‘becoming.’ But I suppose I left you with no other option.”

“So then you decided to enact your crazy, ridiculous, ‘let’s frame Chilton instead’ plan?”

“Come now, Will,” Hannibal remarks with a cheeky smile. “You have to admit that was funny.”

Will chuckles as he sits up. “Well, minus the fact that you held Miriam hostage and *brainwashed* her for *two years* before finally *chopping off* her arm and then *slaughtering* two FBI agents… Yeah, it was pretty funny. Especially when Chilton randomly showed up at my door, covered in blood, thinking he could skip town… Then Jack chased him around my yard for a while.”

Beaming, Hannibal tosses Will the second towel. “If only I could’ve been there.”

Will catches it with a scoff. “If only you could’ve seen the video Francis sent in.” He giggles as he ruffles the towel through his hair. “Or how Chilton looked at the hospital. Oh, and then Jack made me ‘*translate’* for him…!” He can’t stop cackling as they walk back to their gear. “I don’t know how I didn’t crack up!”

They left their backpacks in the shade beneath an outcrop. But as Will reaches for his change of clothes, Hannibal suddenly grabs his arm and pulls him under the overhang.

Will unceremoniously falls to the ground, and Hannibal crouches beside him, eyes on the sky.

Two seconds later, he ducks back as a helicopter roars by. Barely a hundred feet off the ground, they catch the unmistakable black and white pattern. Water shimmers as it orbits the lake several times. Then it veers right and vanishes over the tree line.

Will notes that it only takes five seconds for the propeller sounds to disappear.

“Think it saw us?” Will asks, now in a new pair of hiking attire—a navy blue thermal jacket and dark gray hiking pants.

They trek through the forest, careful to keep under the cover of the dense foliage.

“It’s difficult to say,” Hannibal answers, breaths becoming visible. He also matches Will’s attire, though his jacket is moss green. “They certainly had the opportunity to when they reached the right angle a few times.”

“Maybe they were relying on infrared. Thermal imaging. The rock would’ve hidden us.”

“Perhaps…”

In the fading light, Will notices a dazed look in Hannibal’s eyes. It’s the first sign of extreme exhaustion and pain creeping through the cracks of his mask.

“Hey, let’s stop here.” Out of breath and exaggerating, Will lags behind. “My feet are killing me.”

Hannibal shakes his head. “I would prefer to cover at least five more miles.”

Will wheezes at the thought. “Um, *no*. We can do that tomorrow. Look, the sun’s already setting. Let’s just set up camp here.”

Hannibal trudges on. His answer has been “yes” from the get-go, but the man did always like playing hard to get.

“Any longer, and the fish is going to spoil,” Will adds. “Unless you *want* to try the ‘vomelette’ MRE……”

Finally, Hannibal stops. “The trees here will provide good cover as well.”

“*Great*!” Will exclaims in relief and immediately tosses down his backpack. He grabs the rolled up tent and begins laying it out in a small clearing. Then he stops. “Actually, you pitch the tent. I’ll build a fire.”

From his slouched position at the base of a tree, Hannibal quirks his brow. “We shouldn’t—”

“It’s a stealth fire,” Will explains as he unclips a spade from the side of his backpack. “You’ll see.”

Hannibal takes one more gulp of water. With a grunt, he rises to his feet and makes his way to the semi-unfurled tent. “Another skill learned from Boy Scouts?”

“Hah, *no*.” Will scoffs while he digs into the dark soil. “…YouTube.”

Orange flames crackle from within the small pit. Will adds a handful of sticks inside. Most fascinating is the significant reduction of smoke.

Brushing the dirt from his hands, Will stands with a proud grin on his face. “There you have it. The Dakota Fire Pit. Very fuel efficient, and we can cover it up quick. Just be careful not to catch any underground roots and cause a forest fire, apparently.”

From his nearby seat on a large rock, Hannibal nods. He leans in and warms his hands by the flames. Will rinses his hands with some of his water and finishes with a disinfectant wipe. Then he constructs a tripod of long branches above the pit and dangles the pot over the fire.

Hannibal adds a dash of olive oil and other seasonings while Will unpacks the fillets of trout he caught several hours ago. The meat sizzles upon contacting the hot oil and metal.

After enjoying their fresh-caught main course, Will empties the pot and boils several cups of water. Then he rehydrates a packet of “chicken fettuccine Alfredo”—the only flavor Hannibal finds tolerable. They take turns eating from the same bag.

“We need to go ‘real’ camping one day,” Will finally says after half an hour of silence. He opens a granola bar and takes a bite. “A weeklong fishing trip. Make a huge bonfire, hike without the paranoia, stop and smell the roses, take a few photos…” He chuckles. “Well, who needs a camera when I have *you* painting every chance you get?”

Then Hannibal smiles for the first time since the helicopter incident. He cleans his palate with a swig of water. “How can I resist when we’re surrounded by such exquisite scenery?”

Will smirks. “Hey, are you going to let me see your paintings sometime or what?”

“Perhaps when we reach our new home,” Hannibal reminds with a teasing grin.

With a sigh, Will rolls his eyes. “Ok, well… All the more reason to escape…not like we needed any more.”

Hannibal drops his gaze to look at the fire. “Will…” He works his jaw for a moment. “In the event that we’re captured—”

“Go peacefully and stay alive,” he states firmly, staring into the fire as well. “They’re looking for the littlest excuse to kill you. *Don’t* give them anything.”

“Even so, it’s possible that we may never see each other again.”

“We’ll definitely never touch,*”* goes unsaid, though they both know it.

Hannibal pauses to toss a few sticks into the dying fire. “Jack, and especially Alana, will back you. Of course, I will attest that I kidnapped and brainwashed you. That way, even if you try to deny my claims, your freedom is guaran—”

Will inhales sharply. “*Why* did you refute your insanity defense?”

Hannibal is silent as he avoids eye contact. But Will knows that he just needs to wait him out. At last, Hannibal’s mouth parts. “Even with Chilton out of commission, I am aware of what sort of future awaits me there.”

“Then *why* didn’t you leave when I *told* you to?!” Will snaps, despite already knowing the answer. He ducks his head and grabs at his hair. “*Dammit*!”

Hannibal slowly stands and crosses around the fire. Then he seats himself beside Will, their sides barely touching. “I intend to write to you often, so keep your address updated. If you do not receive a minimum of three letters a week, be sure to have a stern word with Jack.”

Will grimaces. “What are we even *doing,* then? Was… Was there ever a boat, or was *that* a lie too?”

“As far as I’m aware, it should still be there,” Hannibal murmurs. “But its purpose is *not* to take us to our new home.”

Will furrows his brow. “What the *hell* does that even—”

“*Will*.” Hannibal’s hushed voice gives him pause.

“What?”

“Slowly,” he whispers, though there’s no fear in his voice.

It’s excitement.

“Look up,” Hannibal breathes.

Will blinks. Then, one degree at a time, he lifts his head.

Hooves.

Will’s eyes widen as he stares at the large deer—a white-tailed stag—standing barely ten feet away from them. Adorned on its head is a magnificent crown of antlers. The gnarled spikes tower toward the night sky and subtly gleam in the firelight.

In the dim glow, he can almost see feathers.

Then Will realizes that its focus is directly on him, and he recalls the granola bar discarded by his feet. The stag takes a cautious step forward. As it does, the light catches on its flank, revealing the stark shadows of ribs jutting beneath a thin layer of fur.

Heart in his throat, Will picks up the bar and quietly removes the wrapper. Then, with the remaining half held between his fingers, he slowly extends his arm.

Step by anxious step, the desperate creature inches closer. Hannibal looks on with wonder as the stag lowers its head and tentatively nips at the very edge. Then, sensing no danger, it finally takes a small bite.

Will's lips perk in a faint, wistful smile as he watches the emaciated animal eat. Its warm breaths puff across his hand, more tangible and alive than his hallucination ever was.

Just trying to make it.

…one day at a time.

Right as he considers getting another bar, the deer takes the last piece and abruptly darts back toward the trees.

As it runs, Will rises to his feet and takes a few steps after it. The stag halts, and he sees its black silhouette linger for a few seconds, watching him.

Then a harsh gust whips by, sending thousands of branches into a frenzy, and the stag races into the night.

After bracing against the cascade of pine leaves and twigs, Will stares into the endless dark woods. On instinct, he scans the rows of trees for that familiar shadow.

But he doesn't see it.

He hasn't seen it in years.

With a deep sigh, Will mutters, "I used to hallucinate one of these…" A wisp of fog escapes his mouth with each word. "After I saw your first 'gift-wrapped' crime scene, my mind conjured a deer—a majestic stag with a hide of raven's feathers." Eyes on the silent forest, he exhales slowly. "I would see it often. It followed me down roads, visited my hospital room, my cell…"

Closing his eyes, Will takes a shuddering breath. "It killed you in my dreams… It bled out with me on the floor of your kitchen… It was resurrected from your 'broken heart'… It led me, bloody and bruised, down the train tracks…all the way to you."

From his seat on the ground, Hannibal's eyes remain on Will as he processes this revelation. "Then…even from the very beginning, you always knew…"

Will scoffs. “No, you knew even *before* that. ‘Shocked at your associations’… ‘Appalled at your dreams’…”

“But I was merely an ‘uninteresting’ psychiatrist at the time—not even a footnote on one of your doused pages. You had no reason to pay me any mind until I gave you one.” Hannibal smirks. “I’m pleased to know that my very first gift left quite the impression.”

With a deep sigh, Will opens his eyes. Away from the fire, he shoves his numb hands into his lined coat pockets. “Aren’t you tired of this?” he mutters under his breath. “Living day-to-day, on borrowed time, like a starving deer…”

“It is simply the life of a prey animal.”

A dry chuckle escapes Will’s mouth. “But what kind of prey animal *hunts* and *eats* its own kind?”

“Will.”

Finally, he turns, only to see Hannibal with a mischievous glint in his eyes and, again, looking quite devilish in the glow of the flames, though he now has a bit of grizzle on his jaw.

With a flash of teeth, Hannibal gives Will a knowing smile. “It’s only *cannibalism* if we’re equals.”

In true “leave no trace” fashion, they buried the fire pit and covered the upturned dirt with fallen pine leaves and other detritus.

Then Will walks over to the tent and pauses. “What the…” He smacks his head. “*Dammit*, Hannibal! It’s on backwards! …The stakes aren’t even in right!” He groans. “And why did you put it here? Do you *want* to sleep with a sharp rock up your ass?”

“I apologize, Will. Clearly we should leave the camping expertise to you,” he replies with a faint grin. Then he reaches for his backpack while Will begins angrily dismantling the tent.

As Will continues to gripe and apply proper tent pitching technique, Hannibal slips on a headlamp and begins to paint. By the time Will has completed the setup, Hannibal is brushing in the finishing touches.

Will stares at him for a moment, at last realizing Hannibal’s true goal. Without a word, he grabs his backpack and crawls into the tent. After letting the paint dry in the crisp breeze for a few minutes, Hannibal follows suit.

Inside, Will is already bundled in his sleeping bag and resting on his back. Although his eyes are closed, he’s still awake. Hannibal stows away his art supplies and unrolls his sleeping bag.

“You have gloves?” Will grumbles, already wearing a pair.

After a pause, Hannibal begrudgingly gets up and fetches his gloves from his backpack. Then he settles into his own sleeping bag with a sigh. They lie about a foot apart.

A sudden gust rattles the flimsy structure, yet thanks to Will's due diligence, it holds. Hannibal observes the dull-green fabric rippling violently until the gale dies down.

When silent peace returns to the forest and their tiny shelter, Will opens his eyes.

"It's not enough," he says, staring at the ceiling. "Living like this. *Surviving*…"

"Of course. Living solely to survive is seldom done by choice," Hannibal begins, "but because of a lack of choice to do otherwise." He tilts his head toward Will. "Yet does even a lion not have his moments—in between feeding, patrolling his territory, and protecting his young—to simply lounge for hours in the shadow of a tree?"

"Just admit you had fun these past two weeks."

"These past two weeks *and* the past five years." With a small smile, he turns back toward the ceiling. "And while we were apart, my knowledge and memories of you would sustain me until our next encounter."

Will digs his fingers into his sleeping bag. "It wasn't *all* good."

"No, but even our darkest moments had their value. Most crucially, we survived them all… even if only by the skin of our teeth." Hannibal pauses to take a deep breath. "And what about you, Will? Did you delight? Or did you merely tolerate?"

"Of *course* I *delighted*," Will sneers. "I always have……" He sighs. "Especially *now.* Now that I know you better than I ever did before… Now that I know myself, and you know me…"

"Now that you see *beauty* for what it really is."

Will nods and whispers, "Yes."

Another vicious gust whips by, jostling their tent and bending the creaking trees. Countless branches crash together like cresting waves on a jagged cliff side. Pine leaves rain down on the tent's fabric like sea spray.

Will rolls onto his side and faces the outer wall. He shudders, bracing for the onslaught of icy saltwater that never comes.

All the while, Hannibal watches him. Once the wind dies down, he softly asks, "Are you cold?"

Will nestles deeper into his sleeping bag, socked feet curled in towards his body and gloved hands shoved under his armpits. "I don't know. Why?"

"I am."

After a pause, Will turns to see Hannibal merely lying flat on his back with one hand outside of his sleeping bag and draped over his middle.

Will sighs.

After a few seconds, he abruptly unzips his sleeping bag and pulls it next to Hannibal's. Hannibal opens his own sleeping bag, and Will joins the zippers at the base. Then he maneuvers back into his half and joins the zippers at the top.

Just as he's getting comfortable, Hannibal suddenly rolls over and wraps a heavy arm around Will's side, pulling him close. He then drapes a leg over Will's and hooks his ankle beneath the other man's calf.

Will stares wide-eyed into Hannibal's chest, but the relief is immediate. Within seconds, the encompassing chill leaves his tense body, and his tired muscles gradually ease into the warmth. He closes his eyes.

"You'd rather freeze to death than ask for help?" Hannibal murmurs, and Will can feel the words rumble through his chest.

"As much as you'd rather *die* from *exhaustion* than ask for a break," Will retorts, curling his fingers into the front of Hannibal's coat.

Hannibal smirks into the top of Will's head. "Then we really are just alike."

Yet while pressed together, Will can no longer hide his fluttering heartbeat and the subtle, intermittent tremor in his body—not from the cold, but from inescapable, unrelenting anxiety.

An ache in his heart, Hannibal deepens his breaths in hopes of guiding Will to do the same. "Although I understand the difficulty, I encourage you to not anticipate the future with dread, but with curiosity. Soon, the threads of fate will unravel before us. I wonder…is the cat alive or dead?"

"Schrödinger's cat…?"

Hannibal nods. "With bated breath, I look forward to seeing the truth—*our* truth."

For a moment, Will feels the strong urge to make a snide remark about quantum mechanics being indicative of their future "pillow talks," but he decides against it.

"Just promise me," Will murmurs under his breath, "that if you're ever caught…you'll never give up trying to escape."

"Of course," Hannibal assures. "For one, if I am ever moved to a penitentiary, the wardens are bound to not be as careful, and their officers are even more so prone to complacency."

As another torrent of wind batters their tent like the waves that once tore them apart, Hannibal tightens his embrace. "Second, I am only ever one 'overlooked pen' away from freedom. Remember that."

“Good.” Will nods, nuzzling closer and at last allowing exhaustion to drag him under. “…‘cause I’ll be waiting.”

As the approaching storm continues to buffet the paper-thin walls, Hannibal squeezes his eyes shut and leans the side of his stubbled jaw against Will’s untamable hair.

Somewhere within the blue hour of 5 AM, beating propeller blades thundered overhead. Although half-asleep, they both heard it. Yet they remained in each other’s arms until well after sunrise, when the rising temperatures finally forced them apart.

Chapter End Notes

…Yes, these are absolutely Zero Escape references.

The Countdown

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will hears ticking.

He hears it in every crackle of grass, snap of twigs, crunch of gravel…

The pop of his knuckles, knees, neck…

In every drip of water splattering across skin, leaves, rocks…

It's the same.

As on that day.

When he sat in each of their offices and swore loyalty.

…When he made that phone call.

When Hannibal isn't looking, Will scrambles to unlatch the Breitling watch from his wrist. Then he hurls it as far as he can. It soars and arcs.

It disappears into the center of the lake.

But of course, he still hears it.

Ticking away.

In his very heart.

Hannibal recognizes that look.

He sees on Will's face that same look he had when they burned papers in his office, and especially when they had their true last supper at his dining room…

Now here it is again. Will no longer looks at him, but through him. His eyes dart around as if he's afraid he'll miss something.

Nor is he listening. Something else is drowning out Hannibal's words.

Since that fateful night, Hannibal has spent countless hours reflecting on the events that transpired. He thought himself righteous at the time and in the days following. But even then, he was aware that he was turning a blind eye to the other half of the story.

On the day he finally forced himself to look—to revisit those palace rooms and truly *look*—an unsettling, unfamiliar feeling crept into his soul.

Fear.

Doubt.

Remorse.

Guilt.

If only he tried to understand…instead of testing Will.

If only he paid attention…instead of assuming that Will was avoiding the truth.

If only he bothered to turn and see what Will was looking at…

He would've seen an impossible decision.

He would've seen that the choices weren't merely "betray" or "trust."

"Omit" or "confess."

It was *millions*.

Millions of options and their nuances, which then branched out to millions more, and then millions more.

An infinite number of worlds and their possibilities.

But where in this horrendously tangled threads of fate was the "right" one?

Which of the trillions of branches led to the "good" world?

"I decided…when I heard your voice," Will told him one solemn night at the RV's dinette.

That was when the final puzzle piece slotted into place for Hannibal.

This was the epiphany that visited Will in his darkest hour, as he hid in the woods while police raided his house, hunting for him.

"They know" was the "right" answer.

But Hannibal's deadline had already passed.

It didn't have to be.

"I gave you a rare gift, but you didn't want it."

"…Didn't I?"

He did.

Of course, he did.

"You were supposed *to* leave*...!"*

Will had chosen him after all.

Over himself.

He wanted that bluebird to be free, even if it meant losing it forever.

When Hannibal sliced him open, he felt a pain unlike one he had ever felt before.

He is the *Chesapeake Ripper*.

Mutilate, *then* kill.

Few can do it in that order.

Not Abel Gideon, the imposter.

Not Matthew Brown, the fanatic.

Randall Tier, his protégé, was close. But his mutilations were as mindless as a rabid beast's.

Hannibal has done it to countless people, knowing full well what he was doing and the level of suffering he was inflicting. Will once labeled him as an "intelligent psychopath" and a "sadist."

He had only seen the tip of the iceberg then. In truth, there are no labels to describe him. He is *that* and *more*.

He is what he is.

And Hannibal was wounded. Will was supposed to die that day—a fatal injury to the gut is one of the cruelest ways to go—and yet…

It was surgical.

He couldn't do it.

Couldn't cut one inch deeper.

"Did you think you could change me, the way I changed you?"

The way Will looked him in the eye, completely unafraid—unfazed—despite the unspeakable agony. He's never seen it before in any of his hundreds of victims.

"I already did."

No, it couldn't be. It was a fluke. So he reopened Abigail's scar, and again it *hurt*.

It hurt…

Will felt her pain, and in turn, so did Hannibal.

He was too bewildered in the moment to realize what was happening.

Now, he knows.

For the first time in his life, he felt true empathy.

"You can make it all go away," he said, as they stared face-to-face. But was he really saying it, or…?

"Put my head back. Close my eyes…"

"Wade into the quiet of the stream."

A tear streaked down his face.

And Hannibal realized, even in that very moment, that his mind already knew…

Will was right, and he had *chosen right*.

Hannibal was wrong, and so the gate to that "ideal" world closed on them that night.

Forever.

Now fate and circumstance have brought them to the threshold of a new "good" world. Their teacup, mended in gold, dangles precariously over the abyss.

The most precious of second chances.

He would not be wrong again.

Will folds his arms over his "smile."

……I won't be wrong again.

Water boils over the small gas stove. Hannibal tears open the top of the plastic package—beef stew is the flavor—at the notch and pours in exactly two cups.

In lieu of any fish, this will have to do.

With a heavy sigh, he opens another package—this one of freeze-dried scrambled eggs—and pours in the remaining two cups.

Then he seals the tops and sets them aside.

Hunched over and arms folded over his stomach, Will sits in the corner of the tent. He stares at nothing and too much at the same time.

It's the end of a grueling twelve-hour day, in which they dodged five helicopter sightings. Three incidents included helicopters that orbited and hovered in the area for upwards of two hours each. As a result, their hiking time was cut in half. Coupled with dwindling morale, they barely traveled eight miles today.

Hannibal sits several feet away on the opposite side of the tent.

"Will."

He waits for a minute, and upon receiving no response, turns to fetch his paints from his backpack.

"…toying with us," Will mumbles.

Hannibal freezes. This is the first time Will has spoken all day. "What was that?"

"They're just toying with us," he repeats.

With the confirmation that Will is finally listening, Hannibal takes his time to choose his words carefully. "Like how a cat plays with a mouse?"

"Necks locked in the stockade, we've been staring into the basket this whole time… Just didn't want to look."

Empty-handed, Hannibal leaves his backpack and seats himself across from Will. "Borrowed time is still time, and we certainly made the most of it."

Will tenses at that.

Hannibal eyes him. "Perhaps you would've preferred to have driven straight to our final destination?"

Will glances away. "No, of course not. We wouldn't have made it."

"Precisely, especially in a vehicle as distinct as that one. Our temporary saving grace was switching the plates, which you handled after we fetched our supplies from the house on the bluff."

Will sighs. "They sure were happy to let us sit here."

"Why not? Here, we are not a threat to the public. Plus, I'm sure Jack and Alana were hoping that I'd succumb to my injuries. Otherwise, they would've been obligated to provide me with medical care."

"And yet, you still thought it was worth attempting this little hike?"

“It was worth a try.” Hannibal grins softly. “Never underestimate the power of incompetence *or* complacency. Either one in enough quantity can turn the tide of any battle.”

Will briefly raises his eyebrows with a scoff. “I’ll say…”

Hannibal smirks, pleased to see Will returning to himself. “Do not count yourself out before you’ve truly seen your opponent’s hand. They are banking on planting doubt into your mind with these intimidation tactics. Never lay down your arms before the battle’s even begun.”

Will blinks. At last, he looks Hannibal in the eye and, with a faint smile, asks, “You suggesting we conquer Troy alone, Achilles?”

Hannibal chuckles. “I’m merely suggesting that it’s possible, my dear Patroclus.” Then he passes over a plastic spoon and the package of reconstituted beef stew. “But first, you must eat.”

With a sigh, Will takes them. He opens the ziplock at the top but pauses when he sees Hannibal grab the scrambled egg flavor. Will nudges the bag of stew forward. “Here. Trade.”

But Hannibal shakes his head. “It’s fine—”

“We’re *not* arguing on possibly our *last* night together,” Will snaps. “*Take it*.”

“There’s nothing to argue, Will,” Hannibal replies evenly. “I simply can’t eat that.”

Will wrinkles his brow. “Why? You allergic to something? I thought you liked beef stew.”

“I liked yours.”

At a loss, Will glares for a moment before retrieving his food. They eat in strained silence. When finally they finish the last of their meals, Hannibal speaks up:

“Because all others would turn to ash in my mouth.” He keeps his eyes averted. “Even with soup, I have to be careful…”

Will pauses. Something looms just beyond the edges of his vision. Not daring to look, he instead gazes at the floor of the tent.

Flecks of snow drift in.

They’re gone after a blink.

So Will closes his eyes.

A hole in the floor of the mind.

Then he exhales slowly as the epiphany settles within.

“…to make it undeniably chicken.”

Yes, Hannibal answers. But it's the tail end of an echo, growing fainter and fainter as it bounces between the walls of a chamber.

Will stands, in his black coat, at the Norman chapel of their foyer.

The entrance to the catacombs is ajar.

Cursing, he throws open the heavy door and runs inside.

The air is rife with dust and decay. Smokeless torches line the halls. The orbs of hellfire cast black shadows on the beings in the walls.

Beings that line the entire walls from floor to ceiling.

Skulls, bones, teeth, vertebrae…

None of these are nameless.

Will knows some of them.

He may as well have put them there.

Every crime of yours.

…feels like one I'm guilty of.

Every murder.

…stretching backward and forward in time.

Buried beneath the ethereal light and ornate fixtures above, this is the ugly truth—the foundation upon which it all sits.

Yet Will doesn't fear it, nor is he deterred.

He ventures forth. "Hannibal."

A cold draft wafts upon his skin. He follows it down every fork in the gruesome maze.

"She must be…"

At the sound of his voice, Will breaks into a sprint.

"…here. It's why I haven't seen her for so long…"

"Hannibal!" Will skids around each bend. The deeper he goes, the narrower and more disorderly the walls become.

They close in on him.

Reaching for him.

“I have to know…”

In the deepest reaches of the mind, flurries of snow flutter in from beneath a small wooden door. Hannibal places his hand on the tarnished brass handle.

And pulls.

Will rounds the corner and sees pure white light—as excruciatingly bright as the sun—leak in. It burns everything it touches, searing and dissolving it to smoke and ash.

Hinges screech.

Snow cascades in.

And there amidst the eternal blizzard, a small figure stands.

`……aš čia…….`

“*No!*” Will lunges forth and slams the door shut. He shoves himself in front of it and grabs Hannibal’s shoulders.

Upon seeing Hannibal’s stricken, lifeless eyes, Will quickly draws him into a hug.

“No…” he breathes into the freezing skin of Hannibal’s neck and pulls him even closer, trying to force the warmth back into him. “It’s not her… It’s not actually her…”

I’m sorry…

…she was…

`only a figment`

……never truly here.

The rumble starts low. Then it crescendoes into a deafening cacophony. The dusty bones snap and shatter all around them, crashing down on them, burying them—*consuming* them.

But Will doesn’t let go.

He squeezes shut his eyes.

And holds on.

Pine needles scrape down fabric.

The tent rattles in the wind.

Hannibal shudders and places a quivering hand on Will’s back.

“Will…” he murmurs, resting the side of his head against him. “I realize now…that you know me better than I have ever known myself.”

Hannibal sighs softly. “When everyone else saw either a gentleman or a psychopath, you saw me for what I really am… One of those *pitiful* things, sometimes born…fed and kept warm… Yet left to die.”

“But you *didn’t* die.”

“I didn’t want to…” Hannibal trembles. “In order to avoid being culled by the shepherd, I had no choice but to hide among the sheep and look…*normal*.”

Will smirks fleetingly and leans in with his scarred cheek. “…You and me, both, huh?”

Hannibal stills.

Then, an unbidden, genuine laugh escapes him. With tears streaming down his face and soaking into the fabric on Will’s shoulder, his rib cage rattles in raucous—yet free and unabashed—hysterics.

When at last his senses return to him, he pulls back to gently grasp both sides of Will’s head.

Their lips meet with adoration and fervor, and finally…

Finally…

Will stops thinking about the future.

Even if only for this one moment, he stops worrying.

He accepts himself.

He accepts what they are, and what they are to each other.

This exclusivity.

An understanding and love so profound, it can only exist in legends. Yet it is their reality.

Their world.

When Will next opens his eyes, he’s in that kitchen. Every inch of him is soaked to the bone with icy rain. Hannibal stands before him, marred with bruises and drying blood.

He can only stare as Hannibal gently places his warm left hand on the side of Will’s cold face, sliding it down until his fingers cup the base of his skull.

Then the blade gleams.

…as it falls.

Hannibal abruptly raises his empty right hand to grip the other side of Will's head as their lips meet.

Everything that can happen, happens.

"I forgive you, Will.

……will you forgive me?"

"I already did…"

They both know they are glimpsing a world that must exist.

Somewhere.

Even though it no longer exists for them, they found their way back to this moment, all the same.

Against all odds.

The ticking stops.

For the second day in a row, Will awakens with Hannibal's arm draped over his side and their legs in a tangle below the knee. He studies Hannibal's deeply sleeping face, jaw slack and hair unkempt, completely at ease.

Safe.

Nestled in this blissful warmth amid the blue morning chill, there's nothing Will would rather do than close his eyes and go back to sleep.

And yet…

After a quiet sigh, he cautiously shifts out of Hannibal's grasp and out from within their combined sleeping bags. Upon slipping free, he pauses to make sure Hannibal is still asleep before creeping to their backpacks. Kneeling beside Hannibal's, he slowly opens—one tooth at a time—the front pocket's zipper and draws out the black leather book.

After one more cautious glance over his shoulder, he opens it.

On the first page is a portrait of him, reclined on the couch, with contours of dazzling golden light. At once, he's struck by the breathtaking vibrancy and liveliness of the colors. He can see every mindful brushstroke and the delicate touch that went into capturing his features and

cherished imperfections. And there, nestled by his chin, is a cobalt blue songbird, watching over him.

The next page depicts the new home of his memory palace. He sees the large rock by the bend, the pebbly shore, and the scores of dark evergreen pines framing distant, fogbound lavender hills. Morning sunlight shimmers upon the lush, turquoise water that blends into a rich blue at its depths. He can almost see it moving.

The subsequent page is a loose, sketch-like painting of the rainbow trout and the red lure—the one that Will started and Hannibal finished, the one that Hannibal mischievously named after Will and subsequently caught the depicted ‘bow with…on a day Will had been looking forward to for years but never dared to hope would ever happen.

…on the day Hannibal admitted that fly fishing was fun.

Then the following pages are of their hiking journey:

The shimmering grassy field beneath the constellations—Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, and Polaris. He even sees Orion’s Belt and Jupiter. In fact, each and every speck of white in the sky is made with purpose.

The first lake they encountered, sunlight sparkling white on sapphire blue. Framed perfectly on the pebbly bank is Will, mid-cast, the orange line flowing and arcing through the air. And on the end, a speck of scarlet for the lure. The colors have a misty, washed out look to them. Delicate and apologetic, it softly fades into white around the edges.

The hill they rested on, the foreground dappled with shadows amid the bright, smothering heat of the midday sun. Countless spires of pine trees stretching on for miles and fading into the hazy horizon—an ocean nowhere in sight, and a lake that was their oasis.

The next page is another loose drawing—an upturned skull filled with—

Will stifles a laugh.

The umbrella toothpick is a nice touch.

Then the latest page is of himself, beside the soft glow of the fire, feeding the deer, now healthy and restored to its former glory.

Yet toward the edge of the page, where light doesn’t reach…

Will freezes.

Eyes wide, he slowly runs his fingers across the deer’s flank—brown fur in the light and jet-black feathers in the darkness.

Minutes pass as he stares in awe at the exquisite detail and how the edges of the wispy plumage and honed antlers gleam warmly in the firelight.

Then, all too soon, he hears the sleeping bag shift. Will hurriedly stuffs the book back into Hannibal's backpack and zips it up as he simultaneously unzips a pocket in his own backpack.

Will exits the tent. He breathes in the dewey morning air as he finishes buttoning up his charcoal gray dress shirt. Hannibal emerges moments later. He eyes Will's black slacks and hiking boots.

"Are we going for business casual?" he asks lightly.

Will gives him a sassy shrug and pout. "We can."

Hannibal grins as he lifts a hand to rub his stubbled chin. "Then I suppose it's fine time that I shaved."

"In a second." Will flattens his collar and then backs out into the sunlight.

As if on cue, the thundering propellers of a black and white helicopter soar into view. It orbits directly above them, kicking up twigs and pine needles. Grinning, Will shamelessly "flips" them a gesture. Then the police chopper circles them one more time before veering off.

Hannibal smirks as Will returns to the tent. "You seem happy today."

"I'd hope so," he remarks, picking up his water bottle and downing a few gulps. "Just trying to be more 'relaxed' with myself."

"Is it working?" Hannibal inquires as he ducks back into the tent to fetch his shaving supplies.

"*Well*…" Will sighs. He begins rolling up his sleeves to just below the elbow. "I'm not sure 'comfortable' is the right word, but I'm certainly feeling *something*."

With a small washcloth over his shoulder, Hannibal catches up to Will. They walk side by side to the nearby river. "And what would that be?"

Gnawing his lower lip, Will contemplates as he clutches his water filter and holds their empty bottles beneath his other arm. Then his brain finally lands on the right word, and he chuckles.

Amused, Hannibal looks at him curiously.

With a sly smirk, Will glances back and replies:

"Whimsy."

Less than ten miles from their destination, they burn their trash, tent, sleeping bags, and old hiking clothes in a pit. Although Will couldn't bear to burn his fly fishing gear, he hangs onto one telescopic fishing rod and his tackle box, just "because." He keeps his hunting knife strapped to the middle of his back beneath his shirt.

They enjoyed their last serving of coffee that morning. The portable gas stove was practically depleted, so they left it behind. Their only remaining food is a handful of granola bars.

Although he would very much like to, Will doesn't ask what they're going to do about their "lack of food" situation out at sea. He assumes Hannibal has it all figured out, or, more accurately, that he *better* have…

But first thing's first, they need to somehow make it to the boat and leave US waters without being detected by the coast guard.

Will sighs.

As he has known from the very beginning, fugitives on the run are fully aware that escape is futile. Their morale rests on the flimsy foundation of outright denial that it's not.

Hannibal is undoubtedly aware of this too. Yet the only time he was caught was when he surrendered after their "breakup."

Most astounding, however, is that even after all this time, Hannibal has still not entirely divulged his plan to Will.

It is certainly not due to a lack of trust. In these two and a half weeks, the man had been at his most vulnerable, he shed his person suit, and—though old habits die hard—did his best to keep it off.

Will can only guess that it's because Hannibal doesn't want him to overthink the plan. If told in the moment, Will won't have time to be paralyzed with doubt and indecision.

Not knowing, however, sends a chill of uncertainty down Will's spine. But he has since learned to live with it.

He's learned to trust Hannibal.

And himself.

But the anxiety never truly goes away. Like the inevitability of the tides, it ebbs and flows.

Now, with each step taking them ever closer to the end, he feels the waters rising once more.

The ticking of a clock.

On a countdown I can never see.

…but he won't be consumed and controlled by despair anymore.

He chooses *whimsy*.

So, with a mad grin on his face, Will abruptly sidesteps and drapes his right arm over the back of Hannibal's neck. Hannibal flinches at the sudden contact and gives him the side-eye.

“Hey, *Doc*,” Will begins, sass to the max, as he leans obnoxiously on Hannibal. “Y’know, I’ve been thinking… Considering how one or both of us is *very likely* about to get killed or imprisoned for life and whatnot, I think it’s only fair that we review this little ‘zero-sum game’ of ours.”

Hannibal continues to glare at him with a wrinkled brow. His nose twitches, but he’s baffled to smell no alcohol on Will.

Will removes his arm from Hannibal and melodramatically steeples his fingers, deep in thought. “See, if someone were to keep track of how many times one has wronged the other —of which I *have,* in fact, been keeping track—then this person would *clearly* see that *you* still have a lot of making up to do.”

A look of total dread crosses Hannibal’s face as he deduces where this is going. He takes a deep, grounding breath. “And how do you suggest we correct that?”

Will smirks diabolically. “…I want you to sing a certain song.”

Hannibal grimaces.

“And I *know* you know it. It played on the radio station that I was blasting while you were trying to get your beauty sleep.”

Hannibal musters a pained smile as he recalls that day. “And what song would that be…?”

Will lights up. “So you’d do it?”

“Depends. What exactly would this be ‘zeroing out’?”

Will purses his lips as he looks up for a moment. “Tell you what… If you sing this song with me, and actually put *real* effort into it…” He takes a deep breath. “I’ll forgive you for nearly erasing the memories of the most important day of my life, *and*—!” Will pauses for emphasis. “…I’ll forgive you for hiding my encephalitis diagnosis.”

Hannibal raises his brow, suddenly intrigued. “That’s quite the offer… Does this song really mean that much to you?”

“Oh *yes*.” Will nods. “If you put everything you’ve got into this one, three-minute song, all of what I just mentioned will be water under the bridge.”

“Well…” Hannibal tries one last time. “What if I don’t know it?”

Will pretends to contemplate for a moment. “Then I’ll test you. Ready?”

Hannibal’s lip twitches. “……yes.”

Will beams mischievously and says:

“Almost *heaven*…”

Hannibal blinks.

Brimming with excitement, Will looks on expectantly. "*C'mon*, you know it. Hurry up and grab the lyrics out of that memory palace filing cabinet."

Eyes closed, Hannibal hisses in a breath. After a long moment of nothing but the sounds of their footfalls through the brittle forest, he grits out:

"……West……Virginia…"

Will gawks but quickly contains himself. "Blue ridge mou-u-unta-ains!"

"…Shenandoah River."

"Ok, sing it now."

"Life is o-old there…"

"Older than the tre-e-ees! Younger than the mou-u-untains, growin' like a—"

"Will, *please*, if we're going to sing this, at least be *in tune*!"

Chapter End Notes

Take them home, country roads…

~~and as shown in Kingsman 2, this is a perfect "last stand" song~~

Also poor tone-deaf Will.

He probably didn't even realize his piano was out of tune either.

aš čia = I'm here

The Mongoose

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Mom, Mom!"

Dogs whine and squeak. Their nails frantically click and scrape upon the hardwood floor.

Careful to step over Buster who's darting between her feet, Molly rushes into the living room. Feeding off the nervous energy, all nine dogs pace the area incessantly. At the same time, her cellphone buzzes nonstop as countless calls and texts flood in.

She knows what she's about to see.

"Look!" Walter shouts, standing less than a foot away from the TV. He clutches the remote as he points.

Bracing herself, she walks up beside him.

He glances up at her, eyes wild. "Isn't that *Dad*?"

Molly stares at the news helicopter footage. The camera operator increases the exposure in the fading light. Then, through the dense pine trees, she can barely make out a man, in a dark gray dress shirt and black slacks, sprinting through the forest. A few seconds later, several Belgium Malinois K9s sniff the area and then sprint after him. Following their lead, their handlers emerge, guns drawn, shouting and gesturing to each other. Of course, none of it can be heard from the helicopter's vantage point.

"—we've lost sight of Lecter, but looks like the police K9s have found the alleged accomplice," announces the anchorman, somewhat struggling with the impromptu narration. "We just want to remind folks that viewer discretion is advised."

Molly's eyes flick to the scarlet "LIVE" banner in the upper left corner. "…Wally." She can feel the panic rising in her chest. "Go to your room."

"Wait, why?!"

"*Because*—" She hesitates but settles on the truth. "He could die."

"*So*?" he snaps. "Didn't he *kill people*? Didn't he almost get *us* killed?"

She opens her mouth to argue when suddenly the co-anchor gasps. She turns to see a small shockwave strike Will's shoulder. The force sends him tumbling down a deep gulch.

"Non-lethal," confirms the helicopter reporter. "Looks like a bean bag round."

Heart in her throat, she steps even closer to the screen as he writhes at the base of the dried up riverbank. The K9s and their handlers observe from above, guns still trained on him. The one who made the shot aims a rifle with a neon yellow strap.

Will begins to get up. He's hurt, but he shakily struggles to his feet.

Then Molly can no longer contain the scream welling in her throat.

"*Run!*" she shouts at the top of her lungs. "C'mon! It's right there! *You can make it!*"

Walter stares wide-eyed at her. But she doesn't care.

"*RUN!"*

To her left, Winston stops in front of the TV. Eyes focused on the group of pixels resembling his beloved master, he anxiously paws at the ground and barks.

The K9s bark and snarl nonstop from the top of the gulch. Grabbing his re-injured right shoulder, Will heaves himself to his feet, shoes slipping on the smooth rocks, and staggers forth.

The three K9 handlers yell and holler at him to put his hands up, but he can hardly hear them amid the din of the police helicopter circling close above, along with several news helicopters hovering at a much higher altitude.

Another bean bag round whizzes past his back and bursts on the opposite bank. Will finally snaps out of his stunned state and dashes for the tunnel—a large run-off drain. He dives inside just as another round smashes into the side of the entrance.

Running his fingers along the concrete side wall, he races deeper into the pitch darkness, shoes splashing through the thin puddles at the center.

The stuffy, muggy air worsens the farther he goes. He tries not to think about what sort of horrible molds are currently taking root in his lungs.

Suddenly, he doesn't know where he is.

Glancing over his shoulder, it's pitch black as well.

Disoriented, he senses his mind about to spiral. He stresses about not being able to find his way back, the water rising, oxygen running out…

But he keeps walking.

Then his hand hits something vertical. He curls his fingers around the thin rusty pole, and his thumb brushes against a horizontal bar.

A ladder.

After a moment's hesitation, he decides to climb.

One rung at a time, he ascends blindly and unevenly, minding his throbbing right shoulder.

After nearly twenty rungs, the top of his head hits the ceiling. Wincing, he hooks his right arm around the ladder's side. Then he flattens his left palm on the wall above and pushes.

The concrete cover gives a little. With a grunt, he heaves one more time and manages to skew it an inch to the side.

Orange sunlight and fresh air seep through the gap. He hooks his fingers in the opening and pushes it the rest of the way off.

Waves.

As he drags himself out of the stifling abyss, he hears more waves crash against the shore. The scent of salt has never been so sweet.

Glancing around, he finds himself alone and at the edge of the forest. To the right, dry grass blends into dark sand, which slopes down into the roiling Atlantic.

Freedom.

Or at least, the gateway to freedom.

In a white dress shirt and gray slacks, Hannibal gave him the address shortly after their little duet.

Eyes on the darkening cumulonimbus clouds on the horizon, he finally disclosed:

"Set sail directly for the storm and stay with the boat. However, recall that it is *not* meant to take us to our destination."

Brow quirked, Will shook his head in confusion. "So we're supposed to 'jump ship' eventually?"

"Yes. As for when to do so, it'll either happen or it won't. But when it does, believe me…" And once again, Hannibal gave him that sly, omniscient smile. "*You will know*."

Will ducks under a tree as a helicopter soars overhead. But it's only a news chopper. A few seconds later, several rival stations follow in hot pursuit.

He faces their trajectory and spots the white beam of the police helicopter honed in on something less than a half mile away.

Will's hands go cold as he looks on and hears the hordes of sirens racing in. Then he glances over his shoulder at the quiet, tranquil ocean glimmering in the setting sun.

Beckoning him.

Fingers fidgeting madly, he turns toward land.

Dammit!

Will rushes back into battle.

He scales down the ladder.

"Shots fired! Less lethal! He fell into the ravine."

From the driver's seat of an unmarked car, Jack picks up the radio. "Who? *Lecter*?"

"Graham." In the background, dogs bark and other officers shout commands. *"Lost visual. Went into the drainage system."*

Jack curses under his breath. "Cover the exits." After a pause, he adds, "And watch for Lecter. He might try to save Graham."

With a heavy sigh, Jack releases the radio. As officers scramble to get into position and setup a perimeter, the dispatcher relays information from civilians calling in with potential sightings of Lecter and other suspicious individuals—all false leads, Jack knows.

He leans back into his seat.

Kade Prurnell gave him quite the verbose ultimatum following Lecter's actual escape, though Jack was astonished that he even got one in the first place. But he supposes even Prurnell realized that "dealing" with Lecter was going to require someone who is unafraid of bending the rules.

Bending *far* beyond the point of breaking.

"May the end justify the means," he toasted last night—this time, with only Alana via a secure video call.

"To the Devil his due," she gravely recited in place of Will.

Jack reaches beneath his seat and pulls out a small flask. He quickly takes a swig before stowing it back in its hiding spot.

Hiding…

Where are you hiding…

From his place parked at the edge of the tiny seaside town, he vainly scans the dense woods. The shadows are at their longest and darkest under the final moments of the setting sun. With each passing minute, the advantage tips in their quarry's favor.

But he won't leave without his Achilles' heel.

In fact, he's now certain that neither is capable of leaving without the other.

Jack runs a hand down his face as the age-old question rears its ugly head: would none of this have happened if he had just left Will alone? Somehow, he *really* doubts that.

It was only a matter of time.

Will is, and always has been, a ticking time bomb—a mad dog.

In the end, no one could defuse him—not his sweet-natured dogs, not Alana, and not even his wife and stepson.

Jack now accepts that Will is beyond saving, yet Alana implored that he be spared, if at all possible. Perhaps it's due to their former longtime friendship or even the remnants of their old flame, or maybe it's simply just in her nature, but she remains stubbornly determined to "save" Will.

Will's wife, on the other hand, had quite a different, albeit more baffling, take.

She certainly resents Will for thoughtlessly endangering herself and her son and then subsequently abandoning them, so their marriage is as good as done. Yet she somehow seems to believe that Will deserves happiness, even if it means the outrageous and unthinkable.

Perhaps she did know Will better than Jack first gave her credit for.

Flecks of rain dot the windshield.

Jack sighs.

Tonight's storm is expected to be bad. Soon the helicopters will be forced to land due to the gale force winds and whiteout rainy conditions.

Over the radio, officers check in with their locations. The perimeter is sealed on three sides, with the fourth being the sea. A sweep of the forested area revealed no sign of them.

The emergency curfew has been successful at keeping bystanders off the streets, and officers patrolling the town's square give the all-clear as well. There are checkpoints stationed on all outbound roads.

Jack is sure he has them surrounded, and yet…

He picks up the radio. "Any sign of Graham?"

"No," responds an officer.

"Anyone watching the manhole covers?" asks a rather tired officer.

"Too many, but they're all within the perimeter."

"They have to be in there. We should smoke 'em out."

Jack frowns as he listens to the chatter. He highly doubts that Will could tolerate being blind in the claustrophobic tunnels for so long. And surely Lecter would not let himself get trapped underground like a fox in its den.

Beginning to feel restless within the confines of his car, Jack decides to step out for some air. But when he touches the handle, he pauses.

Out of nowhere, he recalls that dark Italian dining room. Dazed and scabbed, Will sat strapped to a chair at the very end. Jack shook the ex-profiler's shoulder.

Will glared groggily at him.

"He's under the table, Jack……"

Jack starts up the car.

His once three-quarters full tank now reads empty.

…Of course.

He draws his gun and grabs the radio. "Lecter's with me," he murmurs. "Backup, keep clear." Heart pounding in his ears, he sets down the radio and mentally counts.

On "three," he bursts out the door.

The moment his feet touch the ground, he scrambles away and aims at the undercarriage of his car. But he doesn't see a flash of a knife.

Perplexed, he backs up and stoops a little more.

Then something slams into him from the left. Jack impacts the asphalt, and he hears his gun clatter as it slides away.

The wind knocked out of him, he clambers to face his attacker when suddenly he finds himself being dragged upright by his collar. In a second, his right arm is wrenched behind his back and something sharp lightly jabs the scarred skin above his jugular.

Flicking his eyes down, he's confused to see what looks like a paintbrush, except the wooden end has been whittled into a fine point—a makeshift ice pick.

"Hello, Jack."

Jack swallows between shallow breaths and sneers. "Dr. *Lecter*."

"Strange," Hannibal rasps, somewhat out of breath. "It feels like ages since I've last spoken to you. But in reality, it's barely been a few weeks."

"Been busy, I take it?"

“Quite the understatement, but yes. Will Graham and I have made *excellent* progress. At long last, he has chosen to follow the urges he kept down for so long…and cultivate them, as the inspirations they are.”

“You… You took a fragile man, *broke* him, and reformed him into your own image,” Jack grits out between clenched teeth. “He’s become a *monster*.”

“He has merely become his truest self—the lion in the room, and the mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by. He was never the fragile little teacup that you and many others were so desperate to believe.”

Propeller blades thunder deafeningly with the arrival of the police chopper. A blinding white spotlight descends upon them—perfect for the final act. Moments later, lights and sirens round the bend as an entourage of police cars swarm the surrounding streets.

“Awfully kind of you to volunteer as the perfect bargaining chip,” Hannibal remarks amid the cacophonous chaos. “I shall not let your generosity go to waste.”

And Jack, determined not to let *this* opportunity go to waste…

Keeps very still.

From the end of the block, the mongoose emerges from a large storm drain. Under the cover of darkness, he sees the scene, reads the room, and his eyes rapidly scan the black rooftops and windows for the snake.

Then, on the top of a three-story building at the edge of town, he spots the glint of its unblinking, reptilian eye—a scope.

With a clear shot.

Gasping, Will darts out into the middle of the street.

And in that split second, an infinite number of possibilities condense into one.

Hannibal sees him in his peripherals, and their eyes meet. The sniper leans on the trigger, and a half second from death, Hannibal receives the epiphany.

A last-minute phone call on a rainy night.

They know.

Hannibal abruptly twists around.

As Jack passes in front of the crosshairs, the sniper flinches but holds fire.

…and the cat lives.

Upon seeing this, Will’s shoulders gradually drop. He turns back to face Hannibal.

When their eyes lock for a second time, all the shrill, deafening sounds drown away until they stand alone in their silence. Everything blurs and bleeds into each other in one meaningless mess.

…until all that remains is the two of them, against the rest of the world.

As it has been and always will be.

With Hannibal focused on his every move, Will slowly raises his hands above his head and nods.

Then the world clicks back into focus.

The whittled paintbrush drops and rolls away. Jack lurches forth and fetches his discarded pistol. With the barrel pointed at Hannibal, he gestures to the ground.

"On your knees, hands behind your head," he orders breathlessly. Then he eyes Will. "*Both* of you."

With his hands behind his back, Will stands at the hood of a police car.

"No, use zip ties," he hears Jack mutter. "This one can slip cuffs."

A moment later, the bite of cold metal leaves his wrists and is replaced with constricting plastic.

Will smirks faintly.

Another officer pats him down—flanks, waistband, arms, legs.

But he neglects to check Will's upper back.

He doesn't find the knife.

Incompetence.

—and the same mistake that got Will stabbed all those years ago, back when he didn't have the stomach to pull the trigger.

This time, the coin toss lands in his favor.

The branch diverges.

With a deep sigh, Jack dismisses the officer and leans against the car to Will's right.

After a long moment, he says flatly, "Well, what'll it be?" Then with seething fury, he adds, "Are you going to cry victim? Or are you going to spend the rest of your life *rotting* one cell down from Lecter's, now that you've become something *completely incompatible* with society?"

Will exhales slowly. “I *am*…who I’ve *always been.*”

Jack takes a sharp breath. “You were a knowledgeable *teacher* whose only flaw was finding it difficult to socialize. You were the *most talented profiler* in the history of the FBI, and while you were with us, you saved countless lives by solving dozens of high profile cases. You were a *hero* and *honored* for it. You even managed to rebuild your life and find yourself a new home and a *real* family. Did all of that mean *nothing* to you?”

Will sighs. “I’m not like the rest of you, Jack. Prestige, accolades, reputation… None of that matters to me.”

Jack grins resentfully. “Well, it *better*. ‘Cause regardless if you get off free or not, whatever *this is* that you had going on with Lecter…is *over*.”

When Will doesn’t respond, Jack leans in closer. “I told you years ago that you needed to *cut that part out of you*. But then you decided to go running off on your own, and look what good that did you.”

Will chuckles dryly. “And *you* could’ve killed him when you had the chance. But instead, you just let him limp away and lick his wounds.”

“Because I thought I needed *you* to kill him. That way, you’d have no one else to blame but yourself.” Jack steps away from the vehicle and waves over an officer. He glares one last time at Will. “*My mistake*.”

“Get him to the station,” Jack mutters and strolls over to where Hannibal is being held. His wrists are also zip tied behind his back. Some poor new recruit is shaking like a leaf as he carefully buckles in a white bite mask. With their weapons drawn, the others brace from well beyond arm’s reach.

All the while, the scene has caused quite a commotion among the public. From the sidewalk, police struggle to keep gawking, recording onlookers behind the yellow tape.

Jack nods toward Hannibal. “That’s enough. Let’s go.”

From the corner of his eyes, Will watches Hannibal being escorted to the back of a police car. Their eyes meet—*not* a goodbye—before the door closes between them.

Will is pushed into a different car, but he keeps his focus on Hannibal’s vehicle and memorizes the license plate. Out of the sea of cop cars, Will notes that only seven of them, including his, depart.

Complacency.

After a minute, he slouches in his seat and reaches for the knife. The sheath is fastened upside down to the middle of his back, with the knife held in place by a small strap across the hilt.

With the ache in his shoulder mostly subsided, his right fingers close around the handle. Then he pushes his thumb beneath the button and coughs at the same time it snaps free. With the blade exposed, he begins to saw at the zip tie.

After a few nerve-racking minutes, he feels the plastic fall away.

Then he keeps his hands behind his back and waits.

Several miles down the road, six police cars, including Hannibal's, make a left-hand turn toward the forest. Will's car continues straight.

"Where are they going?" he asks.

The two cops in the front glance at each other but remain silent.

Gritting his teeth, Will lurches forward and bashes his left shoulder against the dividing glass.

"*Jesus Christ,* relax! They're just going to another station!" snaps the cop in the passenger seat.

The driver gives his partner a warning look.

Icy dread floods Will's veins. As a decision cements in his mind, he slowly sinks into the backrest.

And begins to choke.

After nearly a minute of violent hacking and convulsing, Will collapses across the seats. The cops finally glance back at him in concern and irritation.

The one on the right knocks on the plexiglass. "Hey! …*Hey*!" He glares at Will's unmoving body. "Shit, I don't think he's breathing."

"What? Nah, he's just messing with us."

"*Dude*, what if he had a cyanide pill on him or some shit? What if Lecter gave him some kind of slow-acting poison?" He frantically swivels in his seat. "This one's not supposed to die, *remember*?"

The cop in the driver's seat glares at his panicking partner and then back at Will. He sighs and punches the wheel. "*Dammit*!"

Will feels the car decelerate and abruptly swerve to the side. Grumbling curses, both cops exit the vehicle. Then the door by his head opens.

A pause.

"Ok, check," says the driver.

"Dude, I ain't fuckin' touching him. You hear how he bit a guy's face off?"

"What? *You're* the one who thinks he's dead!"

"Fuck, fine! Just get your taser out."

Gravel crunches as the cop steps forward and slowly reaches for the pulse point on Will's neck.

Then, just as his fingers are about an inch away—

A hand clamps down on his wrist.

Will surges forth and slams the top of his head into the cop's chin. Knocked out cold, the man topples backwards and crashes into the driver. Scrambling to aim around his partner, the other cop deploys the taser.

Will winces as the first prong strikes his chest, but the second one misses.

The volts don't reach him.

And he wins the coin toss again.

Then the cop reaches for his gun. With the knife discarded, Will lunges out of the car. His hands land on the man's right wrist and pin it to the ground. In the struggle, the gun fires once, but the bullet strikes a nearby tree.

Fighting through the twinge in his right shoulder, Will finally manages to wrestle it away. Panting, he stands and aims the barrel at the cop. "Where are they going?"

But the cop, in his panic, only stares at him in confusion. "I don't—"

"*Hannibal*. Where are they taking him?"

"T-The station! The next town over. Look, look, it wasn't my idea—"

"What wasn't?"

"Killing him!" the cop blurts. "They're agents, planned—they'll say he resisted arrest and—"

Will stows the gun in his waistband and picks up his hunting knife. Still half-pinned beneath his partner, the cop gasps. But Will merely swipes the radio off his shoulder and cuts the wire. He does the same to the unconscious cop and acquires his pistol. Finally, he tugs out the single taser barb.

With the second gun in one hand and a knife in the other, Will pauses to look down at the stunned officer. He sighs. "Y'know, I used to be a cop when I was your age." Then, with a flippant shrug and a pout, he adds, "Just wasn't *my brand.*"

As the partner begins to stir, Will steps into the driver's seat. As expected, the keys are still in the ignition. He turns the wheel all the way around and accelerates back the way they came. From the side of the road, the two cops watch him go.

After disabling the CAD, he notices an iPhone in the front passenger seat. He reaches for it and dials out an emergency call.

He puts it on speaker and sets it on the center console.

As the tone drones on, he realizes that his heart rate is oddly slow.

He feels…

Calm.

“H-Hello?”

Will takes a sharp breath. “Molly, it’s me.”

“Oh God—”

“I have to go. Listen…” He swallows at the dryness in his throat. “The rights to my story—this story, from when we first met to today—is *all* yours. Don’t honor me. Embellish all you want. Sell out. Get royalties and all that.” He sighs, feeling his eyes sting. “And if you could post online about the dogs every once in a while…I’d appreciate it.”

“So that’s it then,” she says, even and matter-of-fact. “You’re really going for it.”

Will remains silent as he swerves down the road where he last saw the other police cars.

“Criminal mind…”

Then he nods despite the pointlessness. “Oh *yes*.”

She lets out a long sigh. “Will, I just want you to know…”

He braces for the inevitable platitudes.

“…that I had plenty of time to think about things while lying alone in that hospital bed, and you know what? Good *riddance*. Honestly, you running off would be a *hell* of a lot easier than going through a messy divorce, so…” She lowers her voice to a sincere whisper. “*Good luck*.”

Taken aback, Will glances at the phone with his mouth slightly parted. Then, while absentmindedly rubbing the top of his left hand where his wedding ring is, still stuck on his finger, he smirks. “…Thanks.”

Suddenly, he hears some loud shuffling from the other end. A door slams.

“Hey, Dad.”

Will blinks at the oddly casual tone. “Hey…”

“So did you *really* kill that Tooth Fairy guy?”

“…Yes.”

“*How*?”

Will shifts his jaw. “I sliced open his guts while Hannibal bit out his throat.”

Walter gasps. “*Cool!”*

Will grins.

“Walter!” shrieks Molly in the background between bashing on the door.

“Well, have fun burning in Hell, Dad.”

“Have fun being *grounded*, Wally.”

Walter sighs loudly, and then the line goes dead. After a moment, Will finally ends the call.

Still with a soft grin on his face, he can’t help but wonder—upon somehow surviving and escaping custody—if he should visit Walter a *little* sooner than his high school graduation.

The road loops and merges into a highway. About a mile down the empty straightaway, he spots the fleet of six police cars through the haze of dusky blue.

Will shuts off the headlights and picks up the radio. After steeling his nerves, he clears his throat, deepens his vocal cords, and calls upon training and an accent from his distant past.

Then he raises it to his mouth:

“Shots fired, shots fired! Officer down! Suspect down!”

Chapter End Notes

> Walter as their murder son would be hilarious. He’d be one of those brutally honest kids who’d call them out on everything…

Free Bird

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional CW

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will watches two police cars peel away from the formation and take the next off-ramp. Gazing at the remaining three cars escorting Hannibal's vehicle, he sighs. More leaving would've been nice, but this will have to do.

With no vehicles behind him, he abruptly brakes in the middle of the street. Once at a stop, he jumps out and pops the trunk. He blindly feels around until his hand hits the ballistic shield and spare bulletproof vest. After a moment's contemplation, he hurriedly slips the heavy vest over his shoulders. Then he rushes back into the driver's side and tosses the shield into the passenger seat.

Dusk renders the landscape darker than the cloud-choked sky. With only the red glow of the taillights to guide him down the unlit road, Will eases the gas pedal all the way down to the floor.

As the engine revs into overdrive and the trees blur in his peripherals, he decides to visit his memory palace jukebox.

Of course, the chosen soundtrack of his last stand couldn't be more obvious.

Won't you fly-y-y hi-i-i-igh—

Smirking, he mentally turns the volume all the way up until there's no way Hannibal can avoid the upcoming electric guitar solo from his end of the palace.

Fre-e-ee bi-i-i-ird—

Upon overtaking the trailing cop car, Will gives them a cheeky salute. Stunned, the two agents merely stare at him.

"—*yeahh*!" he hollers as he calls upon the memory of the PIT maneuver training he never finished and swerves left into the lead car's bumper.

Hannibal doesn't know why he's suddenly thinking about grating rock music at a time like this. Upon hearing "suspect down" over the radio, something nearly snapped inside of him.

But that particular Southern drawl gave him pause.

Then, to his right, a blacked out cop car pulls up out of nowhere.

Ah... he thinks during the first second and braces during the next as the bumper guard abruptly slams sideways into his vehicle.

The apparent centrifugal force sends him catapulting against the back of the plastic seats. All four tires screech deafeningly as the car viciously whips around and *thankfully* doesn't flip.

Dazed and stunned from the impact, Hannibal squints through the double vision and struggles to find his bearings. Through the murky sounds, he hears more tires screeching, shouts, pops, and glass shattering.

Then the door by his head opens. He tries to crane his neck, but a heavy weight holds his head down. The leather strap splits at the back, and the mask falls away. Someone grabs his bound wrists. Two seconds later, his hands drop to his sides, free from the plastic.

Then the person grabs Hannibal by the shoulders and heaves him upright. His swimming vision finally stabilizes on those vicious, beautiful eyes—pupils blown wide, with outlines of irises as gray and wild as the approaching midnight storm.

High on adrenaline, Will lightly jostles him. "Hey, hey, you good?"

Eyes soft, Hannibal blinks. "I was worried you were dead."

Will rolls his eyes. "Well, I *might be* in a minute!" He shoves a ballistic shield into Hannibal's grasp. *"Cover me*! Three o'clock!"

Hannibal leaps into the open and raises the shield to their right just as a hail of bullets embeds into the thick metal. Together, they sprint toward the forest.

"Hold and break left!" Will shouts.

As if they've rehearsed this for years, they run straight for several more paces, luring their hunters into the dark forest, before darting in opposite directions and doubling back to the road. In the chaos, the ones nearest to the cars lose sight of them and continue to face the trees.

Hannibal emerges from around a car and rams the side of the shield into the first agent. Then he spins and kicks out his leg, tripping a second agent just as the man manages to fire a single shot. The bullet flies through empty air, and Hannibal knocks him out on the return swing.

When Will cut to the right, he decided to take a wide berth and use the trees as cover. Like a creature of the night, his dilated pupils revealed his surroundings with astounding clarity. Still adjusting to the darkness, his pursuers fired blindly into the forest. Chips of wood burst off trees and missed Will by a long shot.

Peering towards the road, which is illuminated with the headlights of the stopped cars, he braces his right shoulder behind a tree. Stolen pistol gripped tightly in both hands, he waits.

"You're a Weaver.

“I took you for an isosceles guy.”

Oh, Bev, the “real” you would’ve never condoned this…

Yet he calls upon the memory of her, all the same. He feels her hands—one stabilizing his right shoulder and the other adjusting his left elbow.

He remembers how that felt.

“See if that helps with the recoil.”

An agent steps out into the open, silhouette stark against the backlit road.

The next second, Will shifts away from cover and aims.

He fires.

The bullet strikes perfectly on target—the exposed right shoulder. The man jolts and goes down.

Another one rushes in to cover the fallen agent, and Will hits him in the right lower leg.

Then he dashes for the road as a third agent spots him and opens fire.

Splinters and dirt fly up all around Will as he dives for a ditch beside the road. Just before he hits the ground, several bullets strike the center of his vest. With the wind knocked out of him, Will clambers to get back onto his feet.

Then he hears barking.

Will breaks into a sprint as a K9 charges from around the bend. His feet hit pavement, and one second before the K9 sinks its teeth into him, Will remembers an incident from his days as a cop.

He jumps onto the hood of a car.

The K9 falters, unsure of how to handle this specific scenario.

Will smiles.

Although he loves dogs, he knew that he could never be a K9 officer for the simple reason, of course, being that he loves them too much.

He’d never release the precious fur missile on an armed suspect.

Or perhaps, *ever*.

Still, he did partake in a few training sessions back in the day and, in doing so, happened to learn a few tricks himself.

“Halt!” he shouts with authority, and the German Shepherd immediately stops its aimless movements to focus on him.

The handler, the third agent, emerges from the forest and gawks. “Fass, Cody, *fass*!”

The dog glances at its handler. But Will calls back its attention with a few clicks of his tongue. “Cody, *platz*.”

While the dog hesitantly lies down, Will quickly shoves a hand into his pocket.

“*Eat*,” he commands, tossing a piece of a peanut butter granola bar, which it happily snaps up out of the air. Then he tosses it the *entire* bar and instantly becomes the dog’s new favorite human.

“Cody, hier!” its handler continues to yell, but now the dog doesn’t even glance at him.

Will beams as he hops off the car and kneels beside the dog. While placing his hand on the back of its vest, he points toward the handler. The dog follows his line of sight.

Then the handler finally gets the hint and begins to flee back toward the forest.

With a smirk, Will releases the vest and says, “Cody, *fass*!”

The dog charges.

As the shield’s edge connects with a third agent, a fourth emerges from behind and, in his panic, accidentally draws a taser instead of a gun. Both prongs hit Hannibal—one between his shoulder blades and the second at the small of his back. At once, his entire body locks up, and he drops to the asphalt as over 50,000 volts continuously course through him.

Just as the agent swaps the taser for his pistol, Will skids in from the opposite side and shoots. The bullet strikes the right upper arm, and the gun falls away. While the agent is frozen in shock, Will charges for the fallen weapon. He acquires it easily and aims.

“Wrong profession,” Will mutters. Behind him, the taser automatically deactivates after five torturous seconds. Hannibal wheezes as control returns to his muscles. Collar skewed and hair in disarray, he immediately heaves himself upright, tugging out the prongs as he goes.

Finally, the agent snaps out of his stupor and flees into the forest. Will discards his old pistol, which is now empty, and turns to Hannibal.

“That was my fourth.”

Hannibal nods, still catching his breath. “I got three.”

Will pauses. “Where’s Jack?”

A bullet ricocheting off the car answers that question. They both hit the ground as several more burst through the side window.

Hannibal picks up the shield, but Will grabs the handle. “I got him,” he says. “Get a car.”

Hannibal looks Will in the eye and then releases the shield. Will gives him a reassuring grin before aiming the gun low and firing toward the wheels of another police car. Jack is forced to flee into the open, and Will dashes after him into the forest.

More bullets strike the shield until they abruptly stop. Will’s gun clicks as he runs out of ammo as well. So he drops the gun and reaches for his hunting knife. Jack curses as he hurries to reload and rack the pistol. Just as he releases the slide, Will draws his hand back and throws. The blade spins through the air as Jack raises the gun.

Steel sinks deep into Jack’s right shoulder—the mirror image of where he once shot Will. The pistol slipping from his hand, Jack gasps and stumbles backwards. Will dives for the gun and scrambles to his feet as Jack collapses against a tree, gripping his injured arm.

Breathing hard, they glare at one another.

Jack sneers. “Well? Are you going to do it? Finish what you were supposed to do in that dining room four years ago? …Or do you once again not have the stomach to pull the trigger?”

Will takes several steps forward. When his face catches in the moonlight, Jack sees that the man’s eyes are dilated with bloodlust, like a beast on the hunt.

Feral and free.

Untamed and unbroken.

With a quiet sense of power.

No longer is Will the anxious, easily intimidated man Jack once knew. He sees no fear as Will looks down on him and directly into his eyes.

A reversal of subduing Will on the floor of the Hobbs’ kitchen, Jack sees the wendigo in a flash of lightning.

As Will aims the barrel directly at Jack’s face, the corner of Will’s mouth perks into a crooked smile. Then, with a slight shake of his head and lick of his lips, he says, “I don’t want to kill you anymore, *Jack*…” A pause, and then his eyebrow lifts. “Not *now* that you finally find me *interesting*.”

Speechless, Jack can only watch as Will turns and saunters back toward the road.

From the command center, Prurnell grabs the headset off one of the dispatchers. Aghast eyes on the muted news chopper footage and then on the approaching police helicopter feed, she activates the mic.

“Permission to shoot Graham.”

Back on the road, Hannibal finally finds the correct keys to an unmarked vehicle. With all four doors open, the engine starts up with a satisfying rumble.

Night has completely fallen. Through the darkness, he sees Will emerge from the woods.

Suddenly, a beam of white light floods the area. Will braces against the onslaught of wind and debris. Turbines roaring, the police helicopter abruptly swoops down to below fifty feet.

As it veers in, Hannibal sees an officer lean out the window, rifle in hand.

He tenses, prepared to duck out of the way.

Then the officer shifts aim.

Will hears the gunshot before he feels it. Jack's pistol lands out of reach as he hits the ground. The next second, searing pain erupts from his upper left leg. His shriek is lost in the thunder of the propeller blades as he grabs for the middle of his thigh. When he lifts up one of his hands, he sees blood—black in the moonlight and crimson under the spotlight.

As the helicopter banks left for another pass, the blinding spotlight stays over them, setting the stage—the distant news helicopters broadcasting all of it live to the world.

Theater.

And true to his role, from only twenty feet away, Hannibal begins to exit the vehicle.

"*STOP!*" Will shouts at the top of his lungs, and by some miracle, Hannibal actually listens to him. Will sees the helicopter near the end of its orbit.

If Hannibal steps out now, they'll have a clear shot. In ten seconds, they'll have a clear shot of him through the open driver's side door.

As it was four years ago, they're using Will as the perfect bait.

Will looks back at Hannibal. "Just go!" he yells. "*GO!*"

But Hannibal doesn't move. The helicopter slows to a crawl, closing in on the perfect angle.

In desperation, Will locks eyes with him and mouths:

"*…please.*"

Finally, Hannibal snaps out of his trance and hits the gas.

And the brake.

The engine roars to life along with the screeching of the back tires. In seconds, a giant cloud erupts from burning rubber. Stunned, Will stares as acrid white smoke engulfs the area, thoroughly enshrouding them.

Hannibal releases the brake and jerks the wheel to the left. The car charges forth and fishtails around Will, throwing up another wall of smoke, this time against the horde of oncoming police cars.

Then Hannibal jams it in reverse and whips the car around, causing the doors to fly out from the momentum. Gritting his teeth, Will dives into the back. The second he hits the seats, Hannibal floors the gas pedal. All four doors slam shut, and the car swerves off into the night.

From his position lying across the back seats, Will removes his belt and loops it around his injured leg. He slides it above the profusely bleeding wound and grimaces as he pulls the end taut. Once the makeshift tourniquet is secured, he pulls off the bulletproof vest, stares at the black ceiling…

And laughs.

"Did I really just see Hannibal Lecter—*THE* Hannibal Lecter—do a burnout and donuts?"

"And a J-turn," he adds.

Will drapes an arm over his eyes. *He* did an e-brake turn—another dusty memory from police training—following the PIT maneuver, which is how he was able to double back so quickly. Little did he know that Hannibal was well-versed in the "art" as well—the esteemed art of "drive it like you stole it."

"And *where* exactly did you learn to do that?"

"Will, please," Hannibal sighs. "Although I delight in wearing three-piece suits and attending operas, I'm not, as some would say…a '*prude*.'" Then he briefly eyes Will in the rearview mirror. "But yes… I learned from YouTube."

Will cackles, envisioning Hannibal sitting at his office desk after hours, glass of wine in one hand and iPad in the other, watching tutorials on powersliding. "I heard from Pazzi that you were seen driving a motorcycle through Paris."

"Did he mention that I was in all black leather?"

Will grins. "Now *that* I have to see."

Hannibal takes a sharp breath. "Then do a better job at applying pressure. I can smell a lot of blood."

"Yeah, yeah…" Will mutters, half-heartedly pressing a hand over the wound in the middle of his thigh. The fabric on his left leg is already soaked through. Straining to recall his basic sense of anatomy, his femur seems to be intact. He's also aware of the femoral artery, but surely he'd be dead by now if that was struck. "How much longer?"

"Approximately ten minutes."

Will sighs, trying to remain calm while the adrenaline wears off. Glancing out the windows, he sees a white flash in the distance. Moments later, rain dots the glass and streaks horizontally toward the back.

Hannibal activates the windshield wipers as sheets of rain abruptly batter the speeding car. "Keep talking to me, Will."

In the darkness, Will's fingers register two wounds—entry and exit. Not good. The bullet being lodged inside would've been preferable. He swallows back the looming dread in his throat. "So if I died—"

"You're not dying."

"But if I did…before you…" He hesitates, but the steady leaking of blood through his grip urges him on. "…would you eat me?"

Hannibal's hands stiffen on the wheel while his eyes remain focused on the distorted highway signs through the downpour. "You are *remarkable*, Will. I've always admired your courage… And tonight, you have further astounded me, proving once again that I could *never* entirely predict you."

Then Hannibal takes a deep breath, the coppery stench of blood overwhelming within the confines of the enclosed interior. "But I, too, would have to eat your heart. After all…" He lowers his voice to something tender and sincere, yet raw and thoroughly steeped in darkness. "…*it belongs to me.*"

Will smirks, unable to help the rush of pride he feels from eliciting such a reaction.

"Not my brain?" he asks, as casually as talking about the weather.

"No," Hannibal answers immediately. "I had my chance, and I shall not try again."

With a heavy sigh, Will instinctively itches the scar on his forehead. "If I could make one request……it's that no one acquires my body, and *especially* my brain." At last, he admits what he desperately always hoped was clear in between the lines of his scant letter of instructions. "I don't want to be dissected or autopsied, kept in a lab, studied, put on display, *touted* as some kind of *spectacle*…"

"Of course, Will." Voice soft, Hannibal fleetingly glances back at him. "I promise."

Gratitude and affection welling in his heart, Will grins faintly. "My exception is you." He places his arm back over his eyes. "If you want to pickle my brain in a jar, taxidermy me, make glue and putty out of my bones—or even drink Mai Tais out of my skull—then by all means… Do *whatever* you want. …as long as it's only you. And only *with* you."

Hannibal reflects Will's wistful smile. "I shall keep that in mind."

Will lowers his arm and chuckles. "*God*, I could never have this sort of conversation with Molly…or *anyone*, really."

Hannibal smirks. “It’s as you’ve said. Can’t simply talk to any psychiatrist about what’s ‘kicking around’ your head.”

Will sighs, gazing at the ceiling as if he can see the infinite stars through the upholstery, metal, pouring rain, and weeping clouds. “It feels…good.”

Wincing, Will slowly bends his left knee and braces both hands on the loose end of his belt, pulling it tighter. “My father, people who I thought were my friends, and definitely people who *weren’t*…they’d always judge me, admonish me, look at me with…*revulsion.*”

Will laughs bitterly, gritting his teeth through the pain. “I thought it’d stop once I was around like-minded people. …You’d *think*, right? But even when I finally got promoted to homicide, I still got looks. Then it just kept happening, even at the FBI. Everyone regarded me as a freak. They’d beg for my help and then give each other the side-eye whenever I gave them my honest interpretation.”

Will strains to apply more pressure, but the soaked belt is too slippery. “That’s probably why I came to trust you so quickly. For the first time, I could speak plainly to someone and not be ridiculed. Even in the early days, I could sense that you wanted to do the same too.” He smiles fondly. “Looking back, you were actually letting *a lot* slide…even as early as our first few meetings.”

The speeding car slows slightly as Hannibal takes an off-ramp. “It’s simply the nature of humans. They would rather ostracize than be regarded as ‘odd,’ merely because the former is easier to do. Conform. And shame those who don’t.”

“I’ve been controlled by shame for practically my entire life.”

“Not only controlled, but shackled. I was struck by this during our very first meeting. For lack of a better term, you were a circus lion. Born in captivity, trained to be a certain way from birth… Yet the handlers of your life could never fully eliminate your true nature. It’s forever infused in your blood. Engrained in your DNA.”

Hannibal tightens his grip on the wheel while he carefully maneuvers the winding forested road. “I wanted so desperately to see you freed and allowed to embrace that nature. …I was curious to see what would happen. And then that curiosity evolved into obsession.”

“But how *could you*, when you were merely a circus animal yourself?” Will deepens his breaths as he begins to feel a chill descend upon his body, compensating heart thumping fast in his throat.

“Exactly. I used to regard myself as above society’s judgment, free from and unhindered by such mundane worries. But in helping you, I realized how truly my hands were tied—too afraid to speak my truth under fear of being caught.

“Letting them *see* me…was an unspeakable relief. Turning myself in…was even more so. Once that happened, I no longer feared persecution, and I now know that I can survive imprisonment.”

“Then why are you running?” Will grits out, voice wavering. The answer couldn’t be more obvious, but he needs to hear it.

As more and more blood slips between his fingers, he needs to hear it.

“…to stay with you,” Hannibal murmurs.

Even as sorrow stings his eyes, Will can’t help the sprig of whimsy that visits him in this dark hour. “So, to have and to hold? From this day forward…?”

The back tires suddenly slip on the muddied road, but Hannibal rapidly turns the wheel and works through it. “…For better or for worse.”

“For richer…poorer…” Will slowly closes his eyes.

And steps into the Norman chapel.

Rays of golden light shine through the tall, second-story windows.

It’s blissfully warm.

Quiet.

His polished black shoes click atop the ancient mosaic tiles. Dressed in a sharp grayish-blue suit and a white dress shirt, he strolls past the rows of vacant wooden chairs.

Vacant, except for one.

In a gray, three-piece, windowpane suit, dark silk tie, white shirt, and dark brown shoes, Hannibal rises from the front right chair. He fastens the center button on his bespoke jacket and greets Will with a soft smile.

In sickness…

With each step Will takes, he passes through a room. He sees all the times Hannibal sat by his bedside, sometimes for hours. Some of these are even Hannibal’s memories.

Then the reverse happened when Hannibal was on death’s door. On the bleakest days, Will didn’t dare go fly fishing or even visit his precious river—couldn’t bring himself to leave. He had to watch, touch…

Hold on.

In spite of everything.

In health…

Then there were the easier times—simply sitting across from each other at the office, wine glass in hand, talking poetic nonsense. Not all of their sessions were emotionally charged.

Sometimes they really were just conversations. Never had it been so easy to talk to someone just for the sake of talking.

And it's only becoming easier by the day.

On the left of the dancing skull, Will stops across from Hannibal. Then he holds out his right hand.

To love…

Hannibal takes it. Their fingers wrap firmly together. They link their other hands as well—warm and alive, even in their minds.

To cherish…

Then, the way Hannibal stares at Will, with light brown eyes that hold all the tenderness, reverence, and adoration in the world, he says, "…*and not even in death shall we part.*"

Aching to close the gap, Will takes a step forward when suddenly searing pain shoots up his left leg. Wincing, he looks down and sees dark blood drenching the entire length of his pants and rapidly pooling over their single reminder of mortality.

"But you don't know for sure," Will hisses tremulously under his breath, pain disrupting the fantasy. He hears thunder on the horizon. "We *can't* know. No one can."

Hannibal observes him solemnly. "We know what we have now, and I endeavor to make this last as long as possible…"

I'd do anything.

Squeezing his eyes shut against the tears, Will releases Hannibal's hands. "*Then stop the car*."

Will braces against the back of the front seats as Hannibal slams on the brakes. Struggling to function through the agony, he pushes himself back toward the backrest and grits out, "Was that a blind turn?"

Rain ruthlessly pelts the car. "Yes, this is the only road in or out."

Will nods. "Then…the trunk…use the stop sticks." He clenches his teeth and tries to breathe through the spikes of pain. "And the med kit…! Get me the tourniquet!"

Enduring the highly unpleasant process, Will twists the police-issued tourniquet's windlass as much as possible. Breathing hard from the toll, he collapses back onto the seats. After setting the spike strips across the entire width of the road, Hannibal checks the pulse point in Will's left ankle and confirms that the blood flow has stopped.

Death averted. For now.

…and the countdown on his left leg begins.

Through the aching haze, it occurs to Will that it would've been nice to have that Breitling watch on hand. But Hannibal assures that he can keep perfect mental track of the time elapsed. So Will occupies himself with conjuring his memory of the watch.

Perhaps one day he, too, will be able to trust his internal clock. But as of now, they all keep melting into something that would make Dalí proud.

Such is my "persistence of memory"…

About five minutes down the treacherous muddy road, they arrive at a rundown wooden shed near a small ramp into an inlet. Already drenched from the one minute it took to deploy the stop sticks and check the tourniquet's application, Hannibal unflinchingly ventures back into the torrential rain. Hair flat across his face and clothes sticking to his body, he fetches a key from beneath a nearby rock and unlocks the large padlock.

From within the car, Will manages to pull himself upright and watches Hannibal tether something to the back. Then Hannibal hops into the driver's seat and hauls the roughly 25-foot white sailboat out into the rain.

Shrödinger's sailboat exists.

And for the first time since Hannibal surprised him one morning with one-handed push-ups, Will feels genuine hope.

After easing the boat into the water and tethering it to the dock, Hannibal returns to the car. Braced precariously against the side, Will tries to hobble out on his own. He extends his arm, thinking Hannibal is about to offer his shoulder. But Hannibal abruptly stoops and sweeps Will off his feet.

In shock, Will clings to the back of Hannibal's neck as he carries Will bridal-style down the rickety dock. Then he leaps onto the wobbling boat. Will furrows his brow at the crossing of this particular "threshold."

Hannibal, however, seems to think nothing of it and remains focused on the task at hand. He gently sets Will down in front of the companionway. "Can you make it in on your own?" he inquires through the roar of the pouring rain and barrage of winds.

Will nods and eases his way inside. Feeling around in the darkness, his fingers finally hit a switch. Warm light floods the cabin.

The somewhat dusty, white-walled interior has a simple layout of cherry wood furniture—dinette to the left, couch on the right, and bed in the bow—with dark blue cushions. Will decides to hop over to the couch. He collapses across it and rolls onto his back so that his left side is on the outer edge.

Hannibal returns a minute later to toss down the medical kit and, to Will's astonishment, their backpacks. But he departs before Will can question him.

Through the ceiling, he listens, amid the deafening rain, to the thumps of Hannibal's footfalls while the man briskly works to raise the mast and finish rigging the sails.

Feeling the boat rock violently, Will realizes that the keel must still be retracted. He heaves himself upright and limps to the metal handle near the entrance. With only his right leg to brace on, he cranks until he feels the mechanism reach its limit. Then he hurriedly scans the interior for the lock. He locates it in one of the dinette's hollow benches and twists the bolt into place.

The threat of tipping over subsides.

For now.

His entire left leg afflicted with pins and needles, Will settles back onto the couch, hissing as he throws his senseless limb onto the cushions. Eyes on the ceiling, he tries to focus on steadying his breaths. Yet his mind keeps wandering to the image of Hannibal valiantly enduring the brutal downpour and gale force winds.

In total darkness and perhaps only guided by intuition alone, Hannibal navigates them through the choppy waters of the inlet and toward the much more dire conditions of the open ocean.

Somewhere beyond the roiling Atlantic is their new home, a new life, and a promise of the most precious commodity of all…

More time.

Chapter End Notes

And happy they'll be beyond the sea…

Except, Will would never give up sailing.

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will awakens to his pants being cut off.

He scowls. "…do you *have* to?"

From his place kneeling beside the couch, Hannibal pauses his snipping and glances up. His clothes and hair are still drenched, and it seems he didn't even take the time to dry his face.

In the span of a single second, relief, exhaustion, irritation, and amusement cross his face before he simply answers, "Yes." Then he focuses back on the trauma shears and begins to cut around the edges of the tourniquet, careful to time the waves and not cause Will more injury. "…These are beyond saving anyway."

"I don't have an extra pair."

"Then hopefully we'll find some."

Will sighs, suddenly aware of his vexing brain fog and mild sense of nausea. For lack of a better term, he has excellent sea legs, so the unpleasant feeling can only be from the blood loss. He also hopes that Hannibal can tolerate the unending turbulent motion as well, but at a glance, he seems to be coping just fine.

Either that or he's on a crap ton of Dramamine…

With blue latex gloved hands, Hannibal peels off the soiled fabric and uses gauze to wipe away some of the blood. Will eyes the hole in his leg with exasperation. "Well, *doctor*, what's the prognosis?"

"Your femoral artery seems to be intact, but your femoral vein was likely grazed."

Will flippantly lifts his eyebrows. "So…"

"You'll be fine," Hannibal quickly assures with a half-second smile. "Applying the windlass tourniquet was critical in granting us ample time." Then he hesitates.

Will's heart sinks. "What?"

With a grunt, Hannibal stands and walks over to a cabinet. He opens it and peruses the plethora of small glass vials. "While I do have regional anesthetic on hand, its shelf life is past due by a year."

Will slaps a hand to his face. "Oh *God*…"

Hannibal glances over his shoulder. "I assume you want to remain conscious?"

Will groans, massaging his temples. “Tell me *why* you have memory wiping drugs?”

“For kidnapping, of course,” Hannibal answers with an unabashed smile.

Will scoffs dryly, annoyed at himself for even asking. “Yes, of course…”

“I acquired this boat several months before we first met. As such, it is stocked accordingly… which is only for my purposes. Normally, I rely on the amnestic side effects to protect my identity.”

“Like with Miriam Lass.”

“Yes, I used the same type on her to wipe and obscure her memories, in addition to amputating her arm.”

“Well, you’re *not* using that on me,” Will warns with a sneer. “*Not*. *Again*.”

Hannibal sighs as he eyes the tiny labels and sets aside the expired vials. “I’m not going to operate on you without anesthesia, Will. However, allow me to suggest a compromise.”

Will rubs his aching eyes. “Just give it to me straight.”

Hannibal abruptly shuts the cabinet and braces as a violent wave hits the boat. Once it subsides, he reopens the compartment and procures several vials. “I can make a concoction that’s similar to what I used to mend your previous gunshot wound.”

Staring at the ceiling, Will worries his lower lip. “The catch?”

“For one, your memories may be affected, but *only* of the procedure.” He pauses. “Do you remember how I removed Chiyoh’s bullet?”

“No, actually,” Will murmurs, seeing that pure white room, themselves blending like blood and ink in water, the dining table, the wendigo… “But I *sure* did hallucinate.”

“Good,” Hannibal answers, changing into a new pair of gloves and unwrapping a syringe. “Admittedly, hallucinations were not an intended effect. But I suppose your imagination is simply that powerful.”

Will fidgets for a moment. “*Fine*. I’ll take it. But I better not forget about you doing donuts.”

……or us harmonizing “Country Roads.”

Hannibal smirks. “I, too, would be loath to forget even a single second of our ‘Great Escape.’”

“Anything else?”

Hannibal is silent as he concentrates on measuring out the doses. After the third and final vial, he says, “As it’s not entirely the same mixture, I fear that it may not be potent enough.”

Will merely chuckles. “*Strange* to see you like this. Afraid to hurt.”

Syringe in hand, Hannibal kneels back beside the couch and gives Will a wry grin. “Only for you.” Then his eyes become distant and melancholic. “…because you changed me.”

Will nods. After taking a deep breath, he softens his voice yet keeps his tone dismissive. “Well, don’t worry about it. Besides, I don’t fear pain anymore, now that I have somewhere to go…”

Hannibal readies the needle and times the swell of the waves. “When you can’t overcome your surroundings?”

“Put my head back, close my eyes…” Will murmurs, doing exactly that.

Standing at the pebbly bank, pure water rushes by with the relentless flow of time. Here, the weather is peaceful and partly cloudy. The warm sun on his skin balances out the chill of the early morning breeze, which gently rustles the surrounding pines.

With a fly fishing rod over his shoulder and a scarlet lure affixed to the end, Will wades into the quiet of the stream.

In his signature fly fishing attire, Will stands knee-deep in the shallow turquoise waters of the edge. Before him looms the drop-off to an abyss of dark cobalt waters—the new home of his subconscious.

Before finding what would become the new foundation of his memory palace, his past floated in disarray on a backdrop of pitiless black. The clutter was so overwhelming, he decided to turn a blind eye to it all. It was the only way he could live with Molly for three whole years.

He didn’t think about any of it.

It was easier to ignore the chaotic whirlwind of those moments, close his eyes, and pretend to forget.

Of course, all it took to reopen them was a single letter, with words written in immaculate calligraphy, imploring him not to go back—to stay blind.

It’s dark on the other side.

Madness is waiting.

And oh how he ached for it so…

With the river came the restoration of order and cohesive flow to his thoughts.

While Hannibal lay unconscious in the back of the RV, Will scoured the untouched landscape for the most scenic one he could find—a fitting home for the precious memories he now deemed beautiful.

Now he goes through the instinctive motions, pulling out ample line, drawing the rod back, pausing for the bend to unfurl, and then swinging it forth.

The orange line curls around and glides through the crisp, clean air.

The fly delicately lands on the surface. But the moment its scarlet feathers touch the stream, red seeps into the crystalline waters.

Will watches the crimson cloud grow.

Blood.

Chumming the water.

As the tide rushes in, he takes a step back and onto the bow of a boat—*his* sailboat.

The Atlantic stretches eternally beyond the horizon in all directions. He adjusts his grip on the fishing rod, now robust and fit for the deep sea.

Then an immense dorsal fin, steel gray and glistening in the harsh midday sun, breaches the choppy surface.

A shark.

Not mindless or heartless.

Just a living being following its own nature.

It hungrily circles the bait, knowing that it's a trap yet slowly succumbing to temptation.

It's ok.

You'll be ok.

Will flicks his wrist, wriggling the tantalizing chunk of meat like a wounded fish.

Show them who you are.

Trust me…

Then it charges in and bites. The hook catches deep into its jaw. Suddenly, the rod bends in half, heavy line screaming as the leviathan makes a mad dash for the safety of the depths.

Will throws his entire body weight back toward the boat, but the unfathomable power immediately overwhelms him. In desperation, his knuckles whiten, tendons bulge beneath his skin, and he forgets to breathe—doesn't dare breathe—under the ruthless pressure.

Somehow, he finds the sense of mind to keep reeling in.

He digs his feet into the ground, and his shoes begin to sink.

Into sand.

"C'mon, c'mon!" he screams, dragging the dying creature onto land, black blood streaming in its wake. In the dead of night, inky waves furiously roar and reach for them. Hands of lost souls claw up the shore and hook into them, pulling them back toward their rightful graves in the ocean floor.

Will fights them all the way. In the onslaught, his right collarbone is stabbed anew, the gash through his cheek tearing wider, but he doesn't give up.

He didn't give up.

Will gasped.

Blinking rapidly, he looked wildly at his surroundings.

He was kneeling in a small bathroom. His right shoulder ached, the arm tied to his chest. Then he flinched as sharp pain latently seared the right side of his face.

The needle driver pliers nearly slipped from his grasp in his gloved left hand. Thin crimson line dangled in the air.

He squinted at it in confusion and then lifted his gaze.

Before him was Hannibal, with his shirtless back to Will, slumped against the corner of the shower. His forehead was resting on his forearm, which was braced against the back wall of the tiled stall. Diluted blood lazily trickled down the drain.

Will stared at the expanse of skin, marred by the large emblem of Muskrat Farm. Down by the middle right of his back was the entry wound.

After a minute, Hannibal finally noticed the disruption. He slightly tilted his head to glance over his shoulder. "…Will?"

Will shuddered as his awareness abruptly snapped back into his body. "I-I… Sorry, I…" He took a sharp, grounding breath as pain abruptly punished him for speaking. "Did I…? I—" He wanted to sneer at how ridiculously hard it was to get the words out. But he tried one more time, careful not to move his mouth too much. "…Did I pull you from the ocean?"

Dazed from the drugs and their ordeal, Hannibal slowly closed his eyes and rasped, "Yes…" Will watched his back rise with each deep breath. "You saved my life."

Will was silent. His eyes drifted to the array of medical supplies surrounding him and littering the entire floor of the bathroom.

I ended it.

"If you can't—"

“Hold still,” Will interrupted, leaning closer and resting the side of his non-dominant hand on the muscles of Hannibal’s back. Then he recalled Hannibal’s demonstration on the exit wound.

Following the memory exactly, he inserted the curved needle, looped the pliers several times, and tightened the knot. Next, he traded the pliers for scissors and cut the excess.

He repeated the process several more times until the wound was finally sealed shut.

Will sat back with a sigh. “Done.”

Hannibal groggily opened his eyes and reached back to run his gloved fingers across the sutures. ”Very good.”

Will eyed the sand and grime still matted in Hannibal’s hair and remaining tarnished clothes. Will shuddered at the layer still coating his own body as well. He then reached for the duffel bag and located a box of waterproof bandages.

Using his front teeth in lieu of his right arm, Will unwrapped the packaging and applied one over the entry wound. Then he grabbed Hannibal’s shoulder and flipped him over to his back. Through half-lidded eyes, Hannibal watched Will flatten a second plastic bandage over the exit wound.

“Your face…” Hannibal murmured. “I have to…”

“You can’t even sit up yet,” Will mumbled, pulling off his glove with his teeth. “Might as well help you clean up.” When Hannibal seemed to space out, Will inquired a bit louder. “Ok?”

“Do whatever you’d like.”

Sighing through his nose, Will decided to first remove the ruined shoes and socks, carelessly tossing them to the far corner. Upon reaching for the belt, Will hesitated, but not even a hint of concern crossed Hannibal’s face. Reassured, Will unbuckled it and slipped it from the loops. Then he paused.

Mind irritatingly slow from exhaustion, Will envisioned several ‘inelegant’ scenarios of how to remove Hannibal’s pants, all ending in failure. Then he glanced over to the medical kit.

Of course…

Will reached for the trauma shears.

Hannibal’s left eye twitched.

Shears in hand, Will glared at him. “What? Keep them on?”

“What size is in the wardrobe?”

Will briefly squeezed his tired eyes shut, struggling to remember through the headache. But his recollection of that event was limited to a few brief, blurry stills, and even those were melting away by the minute. “I don’t know, the guy was roughly our height. Maybe in between.”

Hannibal sighed and glanced away. “Don’t cut along the seams. Cut across the top.”

“These are beyond saving anyway,” Will muttered under his breath as he began to snip.

Hannibal smiled faintly.

As Will flipped away the fabric, he was somewhat amused to find that Hannibal’s legs were lankier than he realized. Then he slipped the blade beneath the hem of Hannibal’s black boxer briefs and paused. Again, Hannibal remained completely unfazed.

So Will continued to cut away. He lowered his voice. “How many times have you seen me naked?”

“Only twice.”

Will lifted an eyebrow. “*Only*…?”

“Yes.”

Will sighed and set aside the scissors. “Guess I have some catching up to do…”

Hannibal smirked. “Only by one.”

Will struggled to his feet and unhooked the shower head from the holder. Then he knelt beside Hannibal, who was propped against the far corner, and began washing away the violence of the previous night. Through empathy, Will also felt the intensely pleasurable relief of hot water pressure on chilled skin that, for hours, had been itching with dried saltwater, sand, and dirt. Water drained rusty red with three different blood types.

Once most of the grime was rinsed away, Will turned off the water and fetched vials of soap from the duffel bag. His heart ached upon opening one of them. The scent, as sophisticated and nuanced as his wines, couldn’t be more ‘Hannibal.’ Will poured a generous amount onto the top of Hannibal’s head.

While Hannibal lethargically scrubbed away at his body, Will worked the shampoo into his hair and firmly kneaded it into his scalp. Soon, Hannibal’s movements petered out to nothing until he simply sat with his eyes closed, relishing in the sensation. He didn’t dare mention that he now had the strength to do it himself.

Will couldn’t help the affectionate smile that tugged on the uninjured side of his mouth. He picked up the shower head. “Enjoying yourself?”

Eyes still closed, Hannibal grinned softly. “I always hoped there would be more gentle touches between us.”

Raw emotion suddenly welled in Will's throat as he turned on the water and began rinsing away the lather. "So did I…" he whispered, not meant to be audible, but of course Hannibal heard it through the rushing water.

Once the last of the soap disappeared down the drain, Will shut off the water and offered his left shoulder. Careful not to slip, they rose to their feet and stepped onto the bath mat. Will handed him a clean towel from the counter while Hannibal tentatively tried to bear his own weight on his legs.

"I can stand now," he murmured, withdrawing his arm from the back of Will's neck. "Thank you…"

Will watched him wobble a bit as Hannibal dried his face and hair. But he seemed to be able to lean against the sink when he needed to. Reassured, Will went to fetch some clothes from the wardrobe.

But when he returned with a pair of sweatpants, Hannibal shook his head. "Give me something presentable. I feel alert enough to drive. Technically, I'm more well rested than you are."

While Hannibal stood nonchalantly with the towel scarcely draped over his front, Will's eyes subconsciously drifted downward. Of course, Hannibal caught on immediately and smirked. Will abruptly snapped out of his trance, mentally blaming his fatigue. Flustered, he ducked out of the bathroom with an annoyed huff.

When he returned, he hurled a white dress shirt directly into Hannibal's face and unraveled a pair of baggy jeans. After pulling the shirt off his head, Hannibal glared at the pants in disgust but said nothing, aware that it was now futile to convince Will to assist him into something else.

With Hannibal unable to bend over, Will helped him step into a pair of light blue boxers that were adorned with a dachshund pattern. Hannibal narrowed his eyes at the sight but pulled it over his hips anyway. Then Will compressed the jeans down to the hems at the ankles.

Once Hannibal stepped through the openings, Will, to the best of his ability with only the use of his left hand, yanked the jeans up to the middle of Hannibal's thighs. Hannibal did the rest and then pulled the shirt over his arms. With a tremor in his hands, Will watched as Hannibal stubbornly struggled to fasten each button.

"Pass me the supplies, please," Hannibal murmured, facing away and finishing the middle buttons. He left three open at the top.

With a sigh, Will grabbed the medical kit from the ground and placed it on the narrow bathroom counter, half of it resting in the dry basin of the sink. Hannibal pulled on a new pair of gloves and fished out a small flashlight. Then he reached over and delicately peeled the tape off Will's facial bandage.

Will was surprised to see a look of outright dread cross Hannibal's normally stoic face. Leaning closer, Hannibal clicked on the flashlight, and his fears only seemed to worsen.

“That bad, huh?” Will mumbled dryly.

“Will…” Hannibal switched off the flashlight and eyed the packet of sutures. “I can’t fix this without anesthesia.”

With a wrinkle in his brow, Will suppressed a bitter scoff. “Since when did *you* care about that?”

Hannibal’s eyes flicked toward the floor. Then his mouth parted, but he didn’t answer. After a long moment, he finally stated, “Listen to me, Will. Not only can I see your teeth through the gash, but part of your jawbone is also exposed. The only reason why the blade didn’t go all the way to your ear is because it got caught on the inner edge of your mandible.”

But Will was unfazed. He waited until Hannibal looked him in the eyes. Then, voice grim with a seething, threatening undercurrent, he hissed out, “I’m *not* forgetting what happened on that cliff, you understand?”

“It’s likely that you won’t—”

“No, I need a guarantee.” Will glared at him spitefully. “Can you *promise* that I won’t forget?”

Hannibal glowered back with his mouth slightly agape. At last, he set his jaw and answered, “No.”

Will immediately turned on his heels and vacated the bathroom. “Then leave it.”

Upper lip twitching into a snarl, Hannibal watched him go. Then he eyed the small glass vials within the kit. “Will, you’ll die if infection takes hold,” he called out.

Suddenly, Hannibal’s entire body stilled as a scheme took root in his mind. He picked out the vial of anesthetic. Swallowing back the rising dread, Hannibal donned his best mask—his most impervious person suit—and said, “At least allow me to give you an antibiotic injection.” He stepped out into the living space.

With dark circles around his barely opened eyes, Will was slumped in the corner of the couch, at his wit’s end from exhaustion and gazing out the dinette’s bright window with a thousand-yard stare. His clothes and hair were stiff from dried seawater and blood. Sand still dusted his exposed skin and much of his clothing. After a moment, he slowly tilted his head toward Hannibal.

Hannibal instantly hid back behind his suit of armor. “It’ll give us at least another day to reach town and acquire more anesthetic.”

Will’s eyes held on Hannibal’s face. Then, by some miracle, he murmured, “Ok…”

Hannibal ducked back into the bathroom before Will could see the fissures rapidly forming in his façade. Resolve dwindling, he quickly removed the packaging from the syringe and filled it with a dose large enough for the IM injection. After tapping out all the air bubbles, Hannibal re-emerged back into the living area.

He gestured to the dinette booth facing the front of the RV. “Have a seat here.”

With a wheeze, Will shakily rose to his feet and walked over to the booth. Then he reclined against the backrest and closed his weary eyes.

Completely trusting.

Blinking back the grief, Hannibal tenderly placed his left hand on Will’s uninjured shoulder. He observed Will’s reposed face in the sunlight, still dignified and ethereal despite the old scars and catastrophic new wounds.

A man who survived in spite of everything.

Never stopped fighting.

Never gave up.

And the one who Hannibal loved most in this world—his only equal in the entirety of this lonely universe.

The only one.

…in only this point in time.

“Hold still,” Hannibal murmured, syringe poised in his right hand. Mindful of this single chance, he steadied his breaths and stilled the slight tremor in his wrist. “You’ll be fine…

“…I promise.”

“*No*!” Will cries out and clamps a hand to the side of his neck, frantically feeling for the syringe. “No, *no*—!”

He tries to get up, thrash, and get away. But his sluggish, heavy body won’t respond. He feels paralyzed, tied down, so he squeezes his eyes shut and braces for the piercing sting of the needle.

Instead, a gentle hand cups the side of his face. Will flinches, but the hand remains, thumb caressing the skin beneath his eye. Warm.

Safe.

Will snaps open his eyes. Everything is hopelessly blurry, but he tries to squint through it. The lower half of his body is completely numb, with sporadic pin pricks of pain whenever he tries to move.

"…Will," he finally hears. He clings to that cherished, accented voice like a lifeline. "It's alright. Keep still.

"You're fine."

Will laughs bitterly at that. "Am I…?"

"Yes," is the immediate answer. "Everything went well. …It will take time to regain the full use of your leg, but you'll be fine."

Will blinks and gazes at the fuzzy ceiling. He slowly lowers his hand from his neck. His fingers brush the rough fibers of gauze that's tightly wound around his left thigh. The tourniquet is gone, along with the rest of his slacks, but at least he still has his blue boxers on.

He hears rain, wood creaking, and the low rumble of waves. Amid the roaring ambience of the violent tempest is a sharp breath.

"…Do you know where you are?"

Will swallows. "It's… It's sometime after dark." Suddenly, the room pitches drastically before leveling out several seconds later. Will cautiously loosens his grip on the couch cushions. "I'm…in a sailboat somewhere…on the *roiling* Atlantic."

Then he tilts his head to the left, toward the figure kneeling beside him. Slowly but surely, clarity returns to him. Then, at last, his swimming vision stabilizes on those deep-set, warm brown eyes.

"…My name is Will Graham."

Hannibal shows a bit of teeth in his smile, and Will reflects him. He also notices that, once again, Hannibal seems to be seconds from keeling over.

"I… I was…" Hannibal begins, stammering uncharacteristically. "You seemed quite out of it, so I was going to administer the reversal."

Will's eyes flick to the dreaded syringe in Hannibal's right hand.

"Or…we could just let it wear off on its own."

Will nods, briefly closing his eyes. "*Please*."

Hannibal breathlessly chuckles as he caps the needle and sets it aside.

All the while, Will stares deep into Hannibal's eyes, mesmerized by the painfully raw emotions exposed within. Then he realizes that, for the first time, Hannibal's person suit is completely gone. So precarious is his current mental state, it's as if he's been skinned.

It's honest.

Human.

Fragile.

"…You ok?" Will murmurs after a long moment.

Hannibal averts his gaze and takes a shuddering breath. "Just…tired."

An ache in his heart, Will nods faintly. "So am I…" Then he reaches out and gently tugs on the fabric, still somewhat damp from the rain, of Hannibal's shoulder. "…c'mere."

Hannibal blinks and stares blankly for a moment. Then he gradually leans forward until the side of his head rests upon Will's chest, his left ear to Will's heart. Then Hannibal draws his right arm up and flattens his palm on the front of Will's shoulder.

A reversal of their embrace on the cliff.

…and their reunion on the beach.

Will firmly wraps his arms around Hannibal's quivering shoulders as the older man struggles to allow himself to relax. "We should move to the bed."

But Hannibal softly shakes his head. "No, I can't risk falling asleep… I need to get up soon anyway to…attend the sails…and get ready…" He closes his weary eyes. "But we've surpassed the hardest part… Now it's out of our hands… Just have to wait…and hope…that this is the 'good' world."

Will listens to how Hannibal, exhausted beyond comprehension, can't seem to catch his breath.

"It is," Will affirms, soothingly stroking his hands over the tense muscles of Hannibal's upper back. To return the favor, Will deepens his breaths in hopes of guiding Hannibal to do the same.

Hannibal senses what Will is doing and grins. He slowly fills his lungs and releases a long, wavering sigh. "I'm…so glad you're with me, Will." He curls his fingers into Will's shirt as waves relentlessly batter the boat. "*Thank you.*"

Feeling warm tears soak into the middle of his shirt, Will sighs. "I think I finally am, too," he begins. "I *finally* remembered that shower."

"On the longest night?"

"…stitching you, the jeans…those boxers…"

Hannibal smirks fleetingly. "Ah…"

Will raises his eyebrows. "I must've said some horrible stuff after you injected me."

But Hannibal merely shrugs. "Not…*entirely* unwarranted."

Will holds his breath as a thought occurs to him. "Did I say anything of note?"

"…*Yes*." Hannibal shudders. "You said the worst thing you could in that moment."

Will nods, emotion welling in his eyes. He lowers his voice to a whisper. "…I told you that I loved you, didn't I?"

Hannibal stills.

"For the record, I *still* do…somehow—"

Suddenly, Hannibal's lips are on Will's as he surges up and grips the front of Will's collar with both hands. Will closes his eyes and hooks his fingers around the back of Hannibal's head to pull him closer. As rough as they are tender, they nip and pinch with their teeth and caress with their tongues.

Will tastes salt on Hannibal's mouth as more tears trickle down both of their faces. He remembers a similar taste when those lips were hauntingly cold with death—without breath, except for Will desperately forcing his own into those stubborn lungs.

With the drugs still clouding his senses, Will struggles to keep up with how Hannibal seems to be putting a lifetime's worth of affection into this one act. But soon, the shattering of Hannibal's composure forces them to part. He leans his forehead on Will's for a moment before sinking back to rest on Will's chest and nuzzle his neck.

Will grasps Hannibal's left hand and keeps his own left palm on the back of Hannibal's head. Fingers momentarily curling into thin silky hair, he softly asks, "You saw something, didn't you?"

A tremor passes through Hannibal. "It was…" He takes a sharp breath to quell the anxiety welling in his throat. "…was a more delicate procedure than I anticipated. The unstable environment also hindered my progress, and I was forced to administer more anesthetic…"

Hannibal closes his eyes. "As more time passed, I recalled the patient I lost on the table, my last patient as a surgeon, who unexpectedly deteriorated despite my best efforts." He pauses to steady his quickening breaths. "*I still don't understand why*."

"I suppose this is why surgeons aren't allowed to operate on family. Too much pressure. Too much at stake."

"Admittedly, this is also a foreign feeling for me. I've never been the type to be affected by nervousness. Yet, that changed when I saw how you were scarcely a millimeter from death. Had your femoral artery been struck, you would've bled to death in the car. …I once killed a man this way."

"Of course you did." Will dryly glances up for a moment. "And then you'd be a liar for not keeping your promise… 'You'll be fine' is a *lot* more than just saying you'll heal me."

A chuckle escapes Hannibal. Will feels the hot puff of air on the side of his throat. "I promised you many things after you lost consciousness. I simply couldn't stop myself… I fear that I won't be able to uphold most of them."

Will huffs in amusement. “At least promise me that you’ll try?”

Hannibal grins, the smile reaching the creases of his eyes. “Of course,” he murmurs with a light kiss to Will’s jaw.

With a faint smirk, Will closes his eyes, though he’s unable to fully relax with the violent waves tossing them and ceaselessly crashing against the boat.

Wood creaks and groans under the strain. Every so often, he hears a sharp snap. Will turns his head to rest the side of his chin on the top of Hannibal’s head. “The boat’s gonna capsize.”

“I know.”

“It’s supposed to?”

Hannibal nods. “Soon I’ll raise both sails…to ensure that it does. The more pieces, the better.”

Will briefly raises both eyebrows. “So we’re about to get *real* wet, is what you’re saying.”

“To put it crassly, yes.”

“Do we even have the proper equipment?”

“Of course. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to pack a spare all those years ago.”

“So you could *drag* your drugged up hostage with you to *God-knows-where*?”

“…Perhaps.”

Will glares blankly at the ceiling.

Hannibal smirks. “Even if I met someone with similar world views, never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d become so attached, that I’d extend the entirety of my soul to them… and perhaps cease to truly live without them… My red thread of fate was tied to someone after all…”

In his mind’s eye, Will sees Hannibal sitting at the RV’s dinette, meticulously winding a scarlet line, chosen with purpose, around their lure.

A particularly loud boom disrupts the memory. The lights flicker once, and Will’s eyes automatically land on the jagged hairline fracture running halfway across the ceiling.

A lightning bolt.

“This past journey has been my ‘cliff dive,’ Will. My chosen leap of faith.” Hannibal slowly reaches up to rest his left palm on the right side of Will’s head, tip of his thumb brushing over the healed scar amid the stubble. “With the suturing of your latest wound, I have just revived you on the beach.”

Will closes his eyes at the gentle touch, so soothing where there was once so much crippling pain. He shudders as feeling gradually returns to his legs, emerging as intermittent sparks of sensation and a dull ache beneath his bandage. “Then I guess it’s time to steal an RV.”

Hannibal grins and tilts his head to meet Will’s eyes. “Care to join me?”

Will clutches Hannibal’s collar and draws him up for one more kiss. With their foreheads touching and noses overlapping, he smiles.

“Where the *hell* else would I go?”

Chapter End Notes

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea = “between two equally difficult or unacceptable choices […] a person must do wrong or accept a loss no matter what they do”

It apparently originates from when a sailor would have to choose between risking his life to re-seal a seam near the waterline or risk the sinking of the ship by not doing so.

Of course, Hannibal chose the “Devil.”

~~it’s also a 1930’s song with very fitting lyrics…~~

Le Rayon vert

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional CW

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They aren't supposed to be here, but rules never deterred Roy.

Besides, they aren't the only ones breaching the coast guard's prohibited zone. From what he can see on the tracker, many others are *apparently* also suffering from damaged anchors and engines—due to last night's terrible storm, of course. It can't be helped that they've all drifted inside the invisible boundary.

Thanks to the tireless, unpaid efforts of his most loyal fans—some of whom are even his top backers, go figure—they were able to geo-locate the abandoned getaway car, as seen from the news chopper footage when it hovered over the crime scene.

He doesn't know why the FBI bothered to hide the address in the first place, but surely this was their least embarrassing blunder. Watching all those agents get destroyed by two maniacs certainly made for good TV, and the news stations knew it. He almost felt bad when the scruffy guy got shot. But the ensuing stunt was definitely worth it.

According to the leaks, a massive amount of blood was found in the back seats. The police-issued medical kit was also missing. A lot of debate is circulating the web on whether the guy died. Regardless if he did or not, the absence of a body gave Freddie Lounds and her #TeamMurderHusbands crew a lot of fuel for their fire.

Roy sighs, those people are the worst, but they never fail to bring in the views whenever he would post salacious, clickbaity thumbnails or speculate for hours on their forbidden, dark "love affair."

"Hey!" shouts Trev, his occasional co-host and faithful video editor, binoculars pressed hard over his eyes. "I think I see something!"

Roy hurries to the bow of their multi-million dollar yacht. Trev hands him the binoculars and points just off the port bow. The blinding white of the heavily overcast sky is unpleasant to look at, but something sticks out sharply against the blank backdrop.

A broken mast.

As Trev drops anchor, Roy stands on the bow, documenting every detail. Grinning madly, he moves his stabilized smartphone around the scene.

It's a small sailboat. More accurately, it *was* a sailboat. Amid the debris field of splintered wood, the half that remains is listing on its side amid a tangle of rope, twisted shreds of the sails, and the snapped mast.

Trev races over, already in swim trunks. "Bro, this is *crazy*!" he exclaims ecstatically. "They got totally wrecked!" Waterproof GoPro in hand, he leaps into the deep gray water.

Leaning against the railing, Roy snickers excitedly as Trev resurfaces and wipes the excess water from his face. "Bro, what if we find the bodies?"

"I hope! They'll probably be all bloated and weird," Trev notes, swimming toward the upturned hull.

"Watch out for sharks," Roy shouts teasingly. "They might still be munching on them."

Trev scoffs as he aims the camera around. "Oh, is *that* why you wanted me to go first?"

Before Roy can respond, he scowls as a low battery pop-up appears on his phone. "Hey, I'm gonna go grab a charger. Just yell if you find them…or a shark."

"*Yeah*, I'll probably scream!"

With a chuckle, Roy steps inside the newly refurbished interior and swipes a charging pack off the large counter in their full-sized, fully equipped, stainless steel kitchen. Roy used to be interested in cooking, hence the impulsive buy. But it turned out to be *way* easier to hire a professional chef than to try to be one. As a result, all of the equipment is still in excellent condition.

"Hey, we should post an uncensored vid if we find 'em. Pay to unlock," Roy suggests, stepping back outside. Then he smirks as he wipes the camera lens. "Shit, I can't wait to rub this in Freddie's face. Bitch just posted a huge article on why she thinks they're still alive."

Roy hits record and leans over the railing. But the calm waters are oddly quiet.

"Trev?"

Roy lowers his phone to squint at the empty wreckage. Something dark is slowly clouding the water from the other side of the hull.

He frowns as unease begins to set in. Surely he would've heard something if a shark got him.

"Trev!"

Top 50 Reasons Why Both Murder Husbands Are Definitely Still Alive [Updated]

By Freddie Lounds

#1: If their bodies aren't found, then they're ***NOT*** DEAD.

"Shit shit—*shit*—!" Heart thundering in his chest, Roy retreats indoors. The galley is closest.

He grabs the nearest big knife he can find—a cleaver—and struggles to control his spiraling descent into panic. He strains to remember how to contact the coast guard. Usually Trev is responsible for all the maritime stuff.

In desperation, he tries to activate the emergency call on his phone. But of course, there's no signal.

Cursing incessantly under his breath, he debates on whether to make a mad dash for the bathroom, which is the closest locking door, or the radio at the helm, despite not knowing how to use it.

Then he nearly screams at the sound of splashing near the stern. But something about it gives him pause.

It's casual.

Careless.

…in no way "stalking."

Chuckling, he listens as Trev finishes climbing up the ladder and nonchalantly steps onto the deck. Water drips profusely and noisily onto the boat's fiberglass. He even hears Trev snort as he wipes the water off his face.

Of course. Trev had just been making his way back onto the deck.

Dumbass probably forgot to clear the SD card.

Adrenaline wearing off, he sets down the cleaver and grins. Hearing Trev approach, Roy steps outside, eager to give him an earful.

Roughly thirty feet off the bow, the gray ocean continues to darken around the wreckage. If Roy could have checked one more time, he'd see something gradually drift out from behind the sideways hull—a body, in only swim trunks, floating face-down amid the scarlet billows.

Bobbing nearby is a thin paintbrush, the blood-soaked end whittled to a fine point.

Two weeks later

"I told you *five times* already!" Upon being ignored, Zeller groans and swivels 180 degrees in his chair. "*Jimmy*, back me up."

With a sigh, Jimmy Price clicks open the window he just closed and scrolls to the pertinent data. "Here. Each vessel, of which there were *hundreds*, that went within the seventy-mile radius was contacted by the coast guard."

Jack angrily whips around and winces upon straining his right shoulder. He clamps a hand over the throbbing ache. “But did they *board* and make *visual* contact with each one?”

“No—”

“Why *not*?”

“I mean, like Jimmy said, there were *hundreds* of looky-loos violating the search area at the time. There’s no way the coast guard could’ve boarded all of them.”

“Besides,” Price adds, “each boat was contacted on two separate occasions at least one week apart.” He pulls up another chart. “Also, each transmission was subject to a voice profile analysis, and there were *no* matches.”

“And there’s *no way* anyone’s fooling that thing,” Zeller chips in. “Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“Oh *yeah*.” Price nods with a wide grin. “His impressions are really good. You should hear his one of Will Graham hyperventilating.”

Jack’s shoulder burns upon hearing that cursed name. With a heavy sigh, he shakes his head. “No, no, they must’ve stowed away on one. Maybe someone sympathized with them, or maybe they were under duress.”

“Well, the ‘duress’ analysis software came up empty too,” Zeller informs. “Also, no one’s gonna harbor these guys, especially with that *fifty million* dollar bounty the Verger-Blooms put on Lecter’s head.”

With an intense pout, Jack takes several steps toward the projection of the satellite tracker. Playing is a loop of each vessel’s movements over the past two weeks. But with so many dots, he might as well be watching a swarm of flies.

Zeller looks on, this time a bit more somberly. “Jack, just face it. They’re dead. Ok? Their boat capsized, and they either drowned or succumbed to hypothermia or both. It happens all the time. I’m sure their bodies will wash up soon enough.”

“Hey, don’t get me wrong,” Price begins, “I’m glad Lecter’s dead and all, but…” He softens his voice. “It does warm my heart to know that they went together.”

Zeller nods sympathetically. “Nah, don’t feel bad. I was thinking the same.”

“Do you think it was like that scene from the *Titanic*? When Rose told Jack that she’ll never let go?” Price sniffs. “Except they *both* let go?”

“Dude, *stop*.” Zeller quickly grabs the tissue box. “I don’t wanna tear up at work.” He dries his eyes and passes it to Price.

“Sorry.” Price grabs a tissue and blows his nose. Then Zeller holds the box up to Jack.

Jack glares at them.

After setting it aside, Zeller leans back in his chair as he reminisces. “Jeez, those two were *crazy* for each other. Every time I was in the same room with them, I could *feel* the tension. The *pining*. I was like, holy crap, get a room, y’know? Like just kiss already!”

“I was thinking they should’ve done *a lot* more than kiss.” Price giggles. “Hey, did I ever tell you how Bev once dared me to trip Will so that he’d fall into Lecter…just to help ‘em out?”

Zeller gawks. “What? *No*!”

Beaming, Price nods. “And it had to have been when Will was holding coffee, so… *Y’know*.”

Zeller laughs, slapping his knee. “Oh man, you should’ve! I don’t think Lecter would’ve eaten you for that.”

“Yeah, he probably would’ve gifted me lots of expensive wines, huh?”

“Oh, for sure!”

“Damn…”

“*HERE!*” Jack abruptly shouts with a hard punch to the wall, causing Zeller and Price to flinch and nearly fall out of their chairs. “Get me the recording for this one.” He pauses the animation and points at one of the dots.

Zeller pouts but begrudgingly inputs the call sign. “I dunno why I’m listening to you now that you’re technically not my boss—or *anyone’s* boss—anymore, but I guess old habits die hard.”

Terrified, Price fleetingly glances at Jack and braces for impact. Fortunately, Jack simply ignores the jab to his ego. Zeller pulls up a folder of audio files and gestures to it insolently.

“Play the latest transmission,” Jack orders.

With a roll of his eyes, Zeller hits play.

“*This is the United States Coast Guard. For violating the security zone, you are required to provide your full name, date of birth…”*

As the automated message drones on, Zeller skips to the response. Trev and Roy provide their personal information calmly and casually with an edge of exasperated entitlement.

“When was this transmitted?” Jack inquires, brow furrowed in deep concentration.

“About a week ago,” Zeller answers, glancing at the properties. “Like I said, their voice profiles check out.”

“Yeah, plus I know these guys. Lots of people do. They have millions of followers,” Price pipes in. “That’s definitely their voices.”

“And they sound just as *snooty* as ever,” Zeller grumbles. “*God*, I hate them…”

Unperturbed, Jack shifts his stance. “Play me the first recording.”

Zeller sighs and pulls up the transmission from two weeks ago.

Again, Trev and Roy identify themselves.

This time, Jack freezes.

“This is DDX Security…”

“Don’t tell me you missed that,” Jack mutters, feeling his heart begin to race.

Zeller quirks an eyebrow. “Uh, missed what?”

“*Z!*” Jack abruptly gestures to the monitor and instantly regrets it. Grimacing, he grabs his right shoulder. “—they’re the *same!*”

Zeller and Price give each other the side-eye.

“Um, no, they’re not,” Zeller says, wrinkling his brow in confusion. “Didn’t you hear the *real* woman’s voice on the coast guard’s end? They didn’t use the robo-voice until the follow-up calls.”

Jack squeezes his eyes shut against the growing headache. “I’m not talking about the coast guard.”

Reverberating almost mockingly in his mind, Jack can already hear Will’s voice.

…when he stood in for that very first lecture.

“According to the incident report, it was recorded as a false alarm.”

Price tries to laugh it off, but doubt has begun to set in. “Wait, are you saying the second transmission is a…is a *recording*?!”

“There was also a false alarm reported last week.”

“Aren’t these scanner recordings available online?” Jack grits out, pinching the bridge of his nose, eyes still closed.

Zeller averts his eyes, fidgeting. “Well, yeah, but—” He looks over to Price, who’s sitting frozen in shock, appearing quite pale and on the verge of fainting. Zeller scoffs. “Oh c’mon, guys.” Then he abruptly fishes out his phone and opens Instagram.

After a moment of typing and rapid scrolling, Zeller holds out his phone. Amid the jagged cracks and random dead pixels is Roy’s profile.

“See?!” Zeller exclaims. “His last post was just a few days ago!” Then he does a double-take at his phone. “Now—” He chuckles nervously. “—before you say anything, posting pictures

of food is *normal* for him. The guy is a foodie and a wannabe chef. He's *all* about this gourmet, rich people stuff."

Feeling dead inside, Jack gazes blankly at the post. "Z, read me that caption. The text is too small."

Zeller turns the screen back toward his face. "Yeah, let's see, it says…" Suddenly, his eyes widen. "……oh."

Jack slowly closes his eyes and states, not asks, "What does it say."

"U-Um—" Zeller's hands begin to quake.

Price is already passed out in his chair.

Zeller briefly glances at him. "I-It s-says…" He gulps. "It says……"

A few days ago

This tuna should've swum faster LMAO

Hannibal squints at the small screen. "Like this?"

From across the width of the glass dining room table, Will, in a white-gold silk bathrobe, holds out his hand. Hannibal passes him the smartphone. While continuing to chew his food, Will lazily eyes it for a second, scoffs, and passes it back. "Yeah, that's good."

Hannibal, in a velvet and satin smoking jacket and black slacks, stares at the screen and frowns. "I don't understand what that last part means."

"It's just what the kids these days say," Will remarks, shoveling in another mouthful. "Don't worry about it."

"Should I add the 'F' in the middle?"

"Only if you're feeling *saucy*."

Hannibal seriously contemplates for a long moment. Finally, he types in a capital "F" and hits "Post."

Will watches him set aside the phone. "Did you do it?"

“I suppose.” With perfect etiquette, Hannibal picks out the correct silverware and returns to cutting into his “Michelin 3-star”-level meal. He cleans his knife on his fork and delicately places the skewered portion between his teeth. After swallowing, he adds, “But I fail to see the appeal.”

“Well, that’s social media for you,” Will mutters, continuing to hungrily chow away. “I wouldn’t recommend it. *Especially* for you.”

“Whatever happened to ‘the likes and views would stroke your ego’?”

Will smirks. “I don’t think you can handle trolls.”

“Remind me again what that is?”

“Let’s just say they’re something you’d find as *delicious* as this fish.” While Will downs his ice water, he longingly eyes the nearly $200 wine Hannibal is sipping on, though it’s cheap compared to the several bottles Hannibal set aside for later, when Will is finally off all painkillers and antibiotics.

Eventually…

With a soft chuckle, Hannibal sets down his glass. “Well, this *is* a delicious fish, Will.”

Will shakes his head. “Nah, it’s just a skipjack tuna. Nothing crazy like a yellowfin, or even a bluefin.”

“And what would we even do with all that meat?” he asks with a soft smirk. “A bite-sized fish is perfect for just the two of us.”

“Speaking of ‘all that meat’…” Will coats his final piece of gourmet tuna steak in the remaining sauce on his plate. “Did you finish the last of that leg this morning?”

Hannibal sighs. “No. It had already kept for too long, so I decided to dice it and add it to your stash of bait.”

Will nods, chewing. “Ok, I figured. Just wondering.” Then he grins as he swallows.

Will recalls their first conversation on the matter. After extracting all the necessary information from their latest victim, Hannibal made short work of learning yachting basics from the instruction manual and, to avoid suspicion, reactivated the autopilot’s course for Cuba—which effectively decided their next destination.

Then they washed up and changed into a comfortable combination of robes and pajamas. Of course, having never set foot on a luxury yacht before, Will was keen on exploring every inch of their sweet new ride, even if he had to limp and hop around to do so.

The fancy fixtures and sleek interior design definitely made the overnight hours bobbing around in an immersion suit worth it. But the tour was cut short when Hannibal finally convinced Will to rest on the L-shaped sofa.

And being bodily thrown over Hannibal's shoulder was certainly an effective way to convince one as stubborn as Will.

As the lounge area and sofa were adjacent to the kitchen, Will watched Hannibal work his magic of slicing and dicing two grown-ass men. Although groggy from his latest dose of pain meds, he couldn't stop smirking at how giddy Hannibal was to finally have access to a fully equipped, chef's kitchen. "Meat" being back on the menu was an added bonus.

While Hannibal explained and demonstrated, in live talk show host fashion, the purposes of every culinary knife under the sun, Will couldn't help but drift in and out of consciousness.

But Hannibal didn't seem to mind, and perhaps Will being out-of-it was for the best. The sight of very recognizably-human remains being butchered for consumption was going to take some getting used to. The last time Will was party to this was during the skinning and filleting of Randall Tier, which Will didn't mind, as it was in line with the whole "animal" motif.

Plus, the bastard had scratched Buster.

On the other hand, the ease and spiteful pleasure Hannibal took in rendering those, whose only crime was being "tasteless," into something far more palatable was a mindset that Will was currently ambivalent about, though he certainly wouldn't be losing a wink of sleep over these two.

Suddenly, he was being lightly shaken awake in time for dinner.

With aesthetic plating and inedible flourishes, Hannibal had crafted himself a dish of Tandoori Liver with a side of Saffron Risotto—and a generous serving, at that, considering it was their first meal since their highly unsatisfying lunch of granola bars yesterday. And for Will's sensitive post-op stomach…

Will froze, silver spoon halfway to his mouth.

"This…isn't chicken soup."

"Correct," Hannibal said, merely continuing to chew. After a moment, he gave Will a muted look. "Is there a problem?"

Uneasy, Will stared at him. "You tell me."

With a short sigh, Hannibal set down his silverware. "I've searched the area, and there is no fresh chicken or any other meat that is neither heavily processed nor meant to be microwaved." Then he retrieved his knife and fork to continue sawing off modest portions. "So, I made do."

Will scoffed. "No, no…" He tossed down his spoon and rubbed his temples. "What is this, a *test*? Trying to see if I'm one of them?"

"Not at all, Will," Hannibal quickly interjected. "There is no hidden snare. I simply made the clear distinction in my mind, and I was able to make the soup without any issue."

Then the corner of Hannibal's mouth perked into a half-second smirk. "If anything, I thought about a world in which Mischa and I feasted on our captors' flesh…thus staving off our own starvation. In that universe, I would've made her this soup."

Will sat stock still, stunned yet effortlessly envisioning the scenario—a disheveled, blood-soaked boy handing his famished little sister a bowl of "chicken" soup. She knew what it was, yet she first set it aside and flung her arms around him in gratitude—not for the food, but for her brother's life being spared.

Hannibal smiled in his trademark sly, smug way and gestured to the steaming broth. "So, please, before it gets cold…dig in."

Finally, Will smiled back and scooped up a small cube of meat. Hannibal intently watched him eat the spoonful—and then another and another—until the bowl was licked clean.

A week after commandeering the yacht, the coast guard finally caught up to them. Fortunately, that meant via radio only. Otherwise, Hannibal had some blow darts prepared, but KO-ing and wiping the memories of whoever boarded them would only buy them a few hours, of which they would have then made a beeline for shore and hopped on the next flight out of the country.

At least they already had their new passports and a wide selection of fake IDs with the corresponding credit cards. Will didn't know what kind of crazy strings to pull or what underground network to tap into to acquire those. But when the shifty drone delivery was made, Hannibal assured Will that he would teach him all the secrets…eventually.

On their first night aboard, after Roy had "graciously" informed them of all his usernames and passwords, Will immediately got to work with fetching the recording of their previous transmission and splicing out the various responses, not unlike what the Dragon did to the Marlows all those years ago.

It was an added bonus that their prey were prolific vloggers, which gave Will plenty of voice clips to work with for backup.

So when the call finally came in one sunny afternoon, Will leapt from his reclined position, grabbed the nearby crutch Hannibal had crafted out of a few chairs, fetched the MacBook Pro, and answered the radio.

The automated communications made things a cinch.

The whole time, Hannibal remained in his seat, focused on his art book under the strong lighting, his last paintbrush in hand.

Will sighed as he settled back onto the elaborate setup of pillows and satin sheets that adorned a cushioned, window-side bench. From his seated position facing the left, he gingerly bent his knees into 90-degree angles and reclined his overlapping legs. Then, supporting himself with his right palm on the ground, he twisted to the right so that his upper back faced Hannibal. Last, he tilted his head toward the right and dipped his chin a bit.

Hannibal briefly flicked up his gaze. “Bend your right arm more and pull your left leg in closer.”

With a roll of his eyes, Will shifted into the suggested adjustments. “How much longer?” he grumbled. “It’s getting cold.”

“Nearly done,” Hannibal said…for the umpteenth time.

Will furrowed his brow. In the distance, he can see jet skis racing around a three-story yacht. “You *sure* these windows are one-way?”

“Yes,” Hannibal answered curtly.

Will narrowed his eyes at the distracted jet skiers who were gradually drifting closer, videoing themselves doing tricks and epic fails as they go. Will couldn’t care less if his reputation got dragged through the mud, but a screenshot of him in this particular predicament—on the front page of TattleCrime, no less—would’ve been pushing things.

Big black box, or not.

“I still can’t believe I’m actually down by three.”

“Three?” Hannibal asked absentmindedly while brushing in the finishing touches.

“Yes, *three*. Not *two*.”

Hannibal finally paused for a moment. “And *you* didn’t have to model for me…like *this*. Yet here we are.”

“Here we are, indeed,” Will muttered with a faint smirk, still pleased that Hannibal was continuing to make use of his gifted paints.

Just before the sailboat capsized, the contents of their backpacks, along with the medical supplies, had been sealed in a floating waterproof bag, which Hannibal then tethered to himself and Will, effectively securing them all together.

The cold water immersion suits, while certainly the polar opposite of stylish, were surprisingly comfortable—like the ultimate waterbed—despite the roller coaster of waves and frigid rain still pelting their exposed eyes and noses.

As they prepared to abandon ship, Hannibal explained that he kept track of which vehicle their confiscated gear had been stored in. Doing so couldn’t have been further from Will’s mind at the time. The chosen vehicle, which they eventually made their getaway in, being a Dodge Charger was *absolutely* another draw.

Consequently, Will was glad that he decided to hang onto a fishing rod and the tackle box containing their scarlet lure. He also looked forward to trying his hand at deep sea fishing. Hannibal, meanwhile, kept pointedly mentioning how ideal the yacht’s studio-like lighting would be for figure painting, or how the furniture and sheets would make for a perfect backdrop.

After a week aboard the yacht, it happened to be a warmish, sunny day out.

And so, here they were.

“Finished,” Hannibal finally said.

Will almost didn’t believe his ears. After a moment, he stiffly pushed himself upright and grabbed the nearest sheet. Then he propped himself on his single crutch and wrapped the flowing fabric around himself like a makeshift toga.

Hannibal set the open book on the coffee table to dry while he gathered up the colorfully mottled paper towels and murky jar of water. As he washed out his paintbrush, Will eagerly made his way to the painting.

He raised his eyebrows.

Anatomical was the first word that came to mind. With the delicacy of an oil painting, the soft lighting concentrated over his scapula cast deep shadows across the musculature of his back. He could see the sinews in his braced arm and how they twisted alongside his ulna and radius. There were even the subtlest hints of blue beneath his skin where the veins were most concentrated.

In the negative space to the left of him was a shadow of a large feathered wing, implying that the wing itself was present yet invisible. The elbow and wrist joints were bent harshly, as if stricken, reacting. Scattered on the ground around his body were raven’s feathers—black with a hint of violet iridescence.

Metaphysical.

Finally, in the foreground and piercing through the exact path of the bullet was a long, thin arrow with fletchings of bright blue. The blood-red satin sheets pooled beneath him.

And Will realized that he had fallen into a similar position while yelling at Hannibal to leave.

“Wow,” he said, still reeling from the desperate, dire emotions. “Very…dramatic. And flattering.”

“Do you like it?” Hannibal asked, stopping beside Will with hands modestly clasped behind his back. He had left his art supplies to dry on a paper towel by the kitchen sink. “Obviously, I took some creative liberties, but this pose is based on a 1780 painting by Jacques-Louis David. Although arguably just a simple study of the male figure, there seems to be an impassioned story behind the depicted man. Perhaps it helped that he named this piece *Patroclus*.”

“Of course…” Smirking, Will carefully picked up the book. He squinted at the perfectly placed brushstrokes, each one like a caress on his skin. “How do you get the lighting to be so vibrant? The colors and shading are incredible.”

Brimming with pride, Hannibal grinned. “Curious as to why you can’t use your empathic ability to understand my artistic process.”

Will sighed. “Well, I guess it’s like trying to understand a foreign language. I get the emotions and the intent, but any sophisticated details are lost on me.” Then he chuckled. “I can perfectly understand—in *gritty detail*—how a killer painted a scene in blood and viscera, but I can’t understand *this*... Nor do I have any talent for *actual* art.”

Hannibal smirked. “Perhaps I can interest you in a few lessons.”

“Reciprocity for the fishing lessons, huh?” Will noted rhetorically. Then he shrugged. “I don’t know… I’m not exaggerating when I say that I’m a lost cause.”

“On the contrary, prints of your distorted clock are currently featured in the ‘Popular Items’ section of Lounds’ shop.”

Mortified, Will winced. “A-Are you *serious*?”

“Regrettably.” Hannibal sighed, forlorn. “As a result, she has marked up the price over the years. Now your twelve-second scribble is worth ten dollars more than a print of an illustration of my childhood boarding school, which took me nearly four hours to complete.”

Will failed to stifle a pleased smirk. “Well, that’s life.”

“Indeed.”

Chuckling softly, Will was about to set the book down when Hannibal suddenly spoke up.

“Actually,” he began, exuding excitement beneath his outward composure, “now that the paint is fairly dry, I’d like you to turn to the final page.”

After sassily raising an eyebrow, Will delicately flipped to the back of the book.

At once, the breath caught in his throat.

Hannibal glanced at him and beamed smugly. “I assume that’s your river monster?”

Upon seeing that Will was stunned speechless, Hannibal continued, “As it’s aptly an elusive creature, it took a while to find it. But ever since your suggestion to do so, I would stand in your river and fish for it in my dreams. However, I would only ever catch the slightest glimpses of it—sometimes a striped dorsal fin, other times a few spots, the amber eye… So I started the painting here and gradually reconstructed it piece by piece.”

At last, Will rapidly blinked and closed his agape mouth. With an astounded scoff and a hand running down his face, he started and stopped a few times before finally muttering:

“Holy crap, we’re actually *telepaths*.”

“Is there something on your mind?” Hannibal asks, after cleaning off the remnants of their tuna and drying the last of their dishes.

…for the final time on this yacht.

Will sassily shrugs from his place leaning against the counter. “You tell me.”

Hannibal deflects the snark with an irked twitch of his lip. “*Will*, our little ability isn’t foolproof, but I can *infer* that you’re reminiscing about something—and quite loudly, at that.”

“Only natural, all things considered,” Will muses, eyes drifting toward the spacious windows and the reddening sky beyond. “Hey, join me on the deck, will you?”

Leaving his crutch by the kitchen sink, Will carefully begins to walk to the outdoor lounge. Hannibal observes from arm’s length away. Although there is still a slight irregularity in the rhythm of Will’s steps, it’s only noticeable if one is looking for it.

Pleased, Hannibal grins, confident that—come tomorrow morning—Will will be able to walk unassisted through the hotel lobby and to his room without drawing suspicion.

With a heavy sigh, Will reclines into the center of the white outdoor couch while Hannibal settles to his right. The moment their sides touch, Will leans into him, and Hannibal rests his head against the top of Will’s.

Anchored just off the coast of Havana, they watch the calm, rippling water that stretches all the way to the featureless horizon. Blue blends into gold and then deep orange just above the surface. Gracing the soft boundary between sea and sky is the dazzling sun.

“It’s been decades since I’ve last been here,” Will murmurs, “adrift on the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico.”

“I am certainly enjoying the milder climate,” Hannibal remarks. “Difficult to imagine why anyone accustomed to these temperatures would want to brave the frigid North.”

“Well, as a kid, seeing snow for the first time was pretty cool.” Then Will smirks. “But it lost its novelty after a week.”

“I can imagine. Winters on or near the water can be brutal.”

Will nods, shuddering. “Oh yeah, the wind chill was the worst. I was paranoid about getting frostbite just walking to school.” He sighs. “…Can’t imagine what *your* childhood winters were like.”

“Nah, I was born and raised in such conditions. For us, they were simply a fact of life—nothing too extreme or unbearable.” Hannibal closes his eyes. “It was only after disaster struck that I became acutely aware of the brutality of ice.”

As the winds begin to cool, Will curls his right fingers around Hannibal’s left hand, which rests between their laps. “The only thing good about harsh winters…is that they make you appreciate warmth.”

“As tragedy and hardship make one keenly aware of good fortune.”

“Yes…” Will whispers, tightening his grip. “Never know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.”

Hannibal repeatedly and steadily brushes his thumb across Will's knuckles. "Fortunately, we were able to 'know' before all was truly lost."

Suddenly, a memory hits Will. Cruel and unbidden, it visits him and tauntingly flouts that very first moment.

…when it all could have ended.

To nobody's fault but his own.

Brow furrowed, he squeezes his eyes shut. "It almost was… I almost didn't even *try*…"

"When you lost time?"

"Yes, right after. I…" Will drops his gaze to the floor. "I didn't… I didn't realize how bad it was. I thought you'd have everything under control like you always do." He huffs. "Thought I was being *dragged* along for the ride…once again."

Hannibal chuckles. "Well, I assure you, it was the exact opposite at the time."

"But I was seriously considering letting you die. *Maybe* even helping you along." Will sneers. "I wondered if it was too late anyway…"

"How so?"

"Because I memorized when you got shot. I noted the time while Dolarhyde was setting up his camera." Will closes his eyes. "It was 4:43 when 'I' discovered you on the floor of the RV. By the time I finally managed to stop the bleeding, your golden hour had run out."

Hannibal tilts his head. "Are you referring to that urban legend?"

Will opens his eyes. "What do you mean?"

Hannibal grins. "The 'golden hour.' It was a popular concept decades ago, but it has since been more or less debunked. There is no conclusive proof that one hour is the end all be all. As you can imagine, it entirely depends on the cause."

"Well…" Will remarks, "clearly *you* proved it wrong too."

"Somehow." Hannibal drapes his left arm around Will's shoulders and draws him closer. "We had many factors falling in our favor that night. Being submerged in cold water triggered various physiological responses, which slowed my heart rate and constricted my blood vessels. Not only did this give you more time to administer CPR, but it also slowed my bleeding considerably."

As Will solemnly settles in Hannibal's embrace, a thought occurs to him. He lowers his voice. "You broke my fall, didn't you?"

Hannibal pauses. "Why do you say that?"

“You must’ve landed first. That’s why… I mean, how else could I have—”

“Or,” Hannibal interjects with a weary sigh, “did it ever occur to you…that you may have been stronger?”

The words hang in the darkening open air.

Will blinks. “Did you just admit that I’m stronger than you?”

Vexed, Hannibal clicks his tongue as he glances away. “We hit the water at the same time. Even if we hadn’t, I would not have shielded you, Will. My wish was granted at the top of that cliff. It was long past due for you to get yours.”

“I chose to cast the die.”

Hannibal gently nods and dips his chin to murmur into Will’s tousled hair, “…and I had no intention of cheating you from your fate.”

In the final moments of the sunset, they watch the blazing light descend into the darkening sea. The atmosphere warps the circle around the edges.

“Ever see the green flash?” Will abruptly asks.

“Never,” Hannibal admits, facing the sunset.

“Actually…” Will smirks. “Close your eyes.” Reaching over to clasp his left hand over Hannibal’s right shoulder, he buries his head into the crook of Hannibal’s neck and whispers:

“*Let’s go home.*”

Water rises.

It creeps onto the deck, pooling at their ankles. Circular ripples bounce between obstructing furniture and crisscross with one another. Then the flood intensifies, churning, creeping up their knees, engulfing their chests and shoulders. Last submerged are their heads as the surface ascends and vanishes far above them.

Their hair and edges of their loose-fitting clothes flow gracefully in the warm turquoise water.

The furniture and floor dissolve into the deepening blue, leaving only the two of them suspended in this pelagic limbo. Eyes closed, Will shifts so that—as he once did in pitch-black water—his arms snake around Hannibal’s chest and link between his shoulder blades, and Hannibal—in what could have been his final act—locks his hands behind Will’s back.

Then a dark wisp gradually encircles them.

Blood.

It's every drop they've ever shed over the course of their shared time. It billows from each injury and conjoins with other intertwining tendrils.

Soon, nothing can be seen through the enveloping, opaque cloud of crimson, which darkens to black in their gradual descent.

"……what have you done?"

Will's fractured voice echoes from the icy, abysmal depths of Hannibal's memories.

"Quick, reverse it! I-It's not too late!"

But Hannibal only backed away.

"Hannibal…"

Trembling, Will took a step forward.

"—I love *you…! I finally realized that I love you!"*

One month ago, Will collapsed to the bathroom floor in the midst of his wrathful pursuit. Hannibal immediately dropped to his knees and pulled Will into his arms.

"—don't want to kill you—I don't—!" Will gasped out, fighting the chains of sleep with every last ounce of his already depleted strength. *"—I'd rather die…please…*please*……"*

Hannibal tightened his embrace, lips drawn back into an anguished snarl. *"I'm sorry, Will…"* His wavering voice is broken. Utterly broken. *"I'm sorry—!"*

As Hannibal repeatedly stroked Will's matted hair, Will's hand dropped to the floor.

The scene continuing from the initial retelling, Hannibal pulled away a bit and sat stock still, staring at Will's limp body.

Then, Will sees what neither he nor anyone else has seen before.

Hannibal cried.

It was not in his usual, refined, silent way.

He gathered Will back up, buried his face into the torn, soiled fabric of Will's once white shirt…

And *sobbed*.

Shoulders quaking and chest heaving erratically, he truly sobbed and wailed.

As inconsolable as Achilles mourning Patroclus…

This was Hannibal's "goodbye."

Then, as these ghosts return to their rightful place in time, the haunting sounds slowly melt away into their ever-expanding sea of blood.

"Why the confession?" Will murmurs, voice muffled by water—a distant echo.

"You deserve to know," is the simple reply.

"So you could *finally* reunite with that version of me?" Will asks with an undercurrent of snark. "Couldn't *stand* to be alone with that memory?"

"As I said, you told me the worst thing you could at the time. It's only fitting that you know exactly what that was…and heard it spoken from your own mouth."

Wretched words still lingering in his ears, Will stares into the darkness. After a long moment, the sting fades into the ambient hum of underwater currents.

Of blood rushing through their veins.

Will sighs. "After, I dreamt about the 'fall.' Woke up right before we hit the water."

"So you did…" Hannibal breathes pensively. "I wonder…if that was not your brilliant mind forcing you to cling to the one memory that mattered most."

"Oh, it definitely was," Will mutters. "But you had no way of knowing that would happen. *Neither* of us did."

"No, and yet…" Hannibal takes a deep, shuddering breath and whispers, "…I couldn't let you *die*."

Will nods. "Couldn't just let it all sink. You just *had* to risk everything…to try for the good world."

"As you had done for me," Hannibal adds wistfully. "And just as you had chosen to do at the bluff…

"……*I decided to cast the die.*"

A deep boom reverberates through the densely packed particles—the restarting of a great clock tower. Will can't see it, but he can feel the muddied vibrations of the massive cogs. They snap free from shackles of rust and corrosion.

They move.

Turn.

Tick.

A bell tolls.

And so…

Time marches on.

With the continued ringing of the church bell, Will feels the immense pressure begin to alleviate with the changing of the tide. As the water recedes, four walls rise around him, brick by brick.

Two stories high.

Bridged by a ladder.

As the descending surface reaches his head, he feels his shoed feet touch the ground—the dark hardwood floor. His hair is freshly styled, complete with one exquisite "murder" curl on the right side of his forehead.

The dark liquid continues to lower, revealing his old salmon colored shirt and black slacks—everything dry and pristine. Each grievance in his skin, even his still-healing wound, is reduced to a faint scar—a testament to his survival—his unmatched ability to adapt, evolve, and become.

…nearly unmatched.

The bell ceases.

A fireplace crackles softly to his left.

Finally, Will opens his eyes.

The first thing he sees is his chair. With a heavy sigh, he takes a seat.

And already across from him is Hannibal, dressed in his stunning charcoal and crimson windowpane suit. Legs crossed and hands clasped upon his lap, his eyes are downcast and looking off to the side, as if ashamed.

Will notes how Hannibal's hair is back to its usual length with bangs neatly parted to the left of his face, yet not completely slicked back. Will grins at the almost unbearable nostalgia. After a moment, he remarks, "Thought you'd be happy to be back in your favorite suit."

At last, Hannibal lifts his chin and meets Will's eyes. He smirks for a full second. "Believe me, I am." Then he takes a gander at himself. "Everything from the pattern on my tie to the number of crosses on my suit is perfect. Immaculate."

Will chuckles. "Not everything… Check your watch."

Hannibal gives him a look before drawing up his left cuff. On the face is the encephalitis clock.

And Hannibal can't stop the amused grin that tugs on his lips.

Will briefly glances down at himself. “Alright, now explain *this,*” he says, dramatically gesturing at his clothes.

But Hannibal merely stares back, unfazed. “Is there a problem?”

Will blinks rapidly. “Just…*why*?”

“Why not?” Hannibal chuckles. “It’s as I mentioned before. I’ve discovered you here, *victorious*.”

Will snarkily raises his eyebrows. “Like this?”

“Yes.” A look of reverie and fondness crosses Hannibal’s face as he recalls that distant night. “Not only did you refrain from killing me, but you donned your best suit of armor and waltzed, with the utmost confidence, back into the lion’s den.”

“The lamb that lay down with the lion.”

Hannibal nods. “Except you were no mere ‘lamb.’ Never had I seen such resilience and fortitude before. You returned with the intention of taking back your life—steeling yourself for battle—when, in truth, you had already won the war.”

“Oh,” Will mutters, voice flippant with a hint of disappointment. “I thought you were gonna mention how ‘*delectable*’ I looked.”

Hannibal sighs. “That too…”

Will smirks. Then he abruptly plants both hands onto the armrests and gets up with a start. “Well, the sunset’s not waiting forever.” Hands in his pockets, he saunters over to the striped curtains.

They draw automatically, revealing the calm, sparkling ocean—the view from their yacht.

Behind him, he hears Hannibal open his cabinet and pop a cork.

Will rolls his eyes and turns around. “Can’t you just imagine the wine in—” He pauses, gaze fixed on the white label and gold foil. “Isn’t that…?” He blinks. “Is that the one I *gave* you?”

“Yes,” Hannibal answers curtly, pouring two perfect portions and gracefully rotating the bottle to cast off the lingering drops. “I meant to share it with you in life. But as so often happens, I kept putting it off and never got around to doing so.”

With an amused shake of his head, Will scoffs. “It’s just a twenty-dollar wine.” Then he drops his chin and bashfully rubs the back of his neck. “*Hell*, I spent a stupidly long time in the liquor aisle wondering which one would’ve been good enough for you. But I didn’t want to spend more than fifty bucks…” He shakes his head. “I even considered just attending your damn party, thinking it’d at least save me the embarrassment of gifting you a crappy wine.”

“Well, while I would have much preferred if you stayed, I’m glad you stuck to your budget,” Hannibal remarks, walking over with a glass in each hand. “There was no need to splurge on

such an inconsequential formality. It would've gone to waste anyway." He stops to the right of Will and hands over a glass.

Will takes it with a self-deprecating smirk. "I'm just glad you didn't try it. Now you can imagine whatever the hell you want."

Hannibal gives him a knowing grin. "Precisely." He holds out his glass, but Will abruptly turns away.

"Oh, it's time. Watch," he says, peering out the window.

The final sliver of sun slowly undulates like a flame, distorting in a mirage of ripples as it refracts through countless particles in the atmosphere.

Hannibal takes a step closer to the window and watches with bated breath.

Then, just before the shimmering gold line is swallowed whole by the sea, brilliant emerald green emanates from the vanishing point and flares brightly for one whole second.

When it fades, only the blackened sea and burnt orange sky are left in its wake. The sun is gone.

"Nice, that was a good one," Will notes. He glances over and chuckles at Hannibal's awed expression.

"Beautiful…'a green which no artist could ever obtain on his palette'…" Hannibal recites under his breath. "*Le Rayon vert*—the green ray, as wondrous as it is portrayed in Jules Verne's novel."

Intrigued, Will wrinkles his brow. "Really? I never knew he wrote about it."

Hannibal nods and manifests the book in his left hand. He flips to the second chapter. "According to legend, as described by Verne, the green ray 'has the virtue of making him who has seen it impossible to be deceived in matters of sentiment; at its apparition all deceit and falsehood are done away'…"

Then Hannibal smirks as he reads, "'and he who has been fortunate enough once to behold it'—" He lowers the book to face Will. "—'is enabled to see closely into his own heart and read the thoughts of others.'"

Massaging his smiling mouth, Will glances away in astonishment and disbelief. "*Well*…that certainly would explain *a lot,"* he quips. "I've seen the green flash countless times growing up along the Great Lakes."

Hannibal smiles warmly. "Then perhaps there is merit to this legend, after all." He waves away the book, which dissipates into thin air and returns to its proper place in the second story shelves.

With a soft chuckle, Will shifts toward Hannibal and eyes him mischievously. "So let's test it, shall we?"

Ever eager for a challenge, Hannibal subtly raises his chin. “Very well.”

Glancing up for a second, Will clicks his tongue. Then he locks eyes with Hannibal and lifts his glass. “Tell me what I’m thinking.”

Hannibal’s eyes flick back and forth between both of Will’s eyes—irises which hold every nuanced color of the sea, and pupils that house the unfathomable depths of his ever-evolving soul—the windows to the enigmatic mirror-neurons of his brilliant mind—with steadfast focus on whom he holds most near and dear to his heart.

Will was right.

Eyes truly *are* distracting.

Struggling to parse through the deluge of information—from simultaneously seeing too much and not enough—Hannibal shifts his jaw as he hesitates.

Dusk paints the sky in a breathtaking gradient of ultramarine blue and smoldering orange—fading embers of the once bright blessed day being gracefully overtaken by the dark sacred night.

The sparse lights switch on and cast the two in the familiar, gentle glow of their evening appointments.

At last, Hannibal opens his mouth. “I think you are finally allowing yourself to believe in this world—this precious, singular universe we have found ourselves in—and *delight* in it.” But after a pause, he tilts his head, perplexed. “Yet, for some reason…you seem reluctant to call it ‘good.’”

Lips sealed, Will smiles, the tenderness and warmth reaching the creases by his eyes. Focus coyly downcast, he closes the gap with a casual step forward.

Face-to-face, they stand together.

…framed by the towering window and two-tone curtains.

…against a backdrop of infinite water and the dimming of the stage lights.

“I think it’s beautiful,” Will murmurs. Then he touches the edge of his glass to Hannibal’s.

The crystal chimes sweetly through the comfortable air of this haven, now forever adrift on nameless seas.

The only place they truly feel safe.

Staring deep into each other’s eyes, they take a single sip of the blood-red wine and leisurely let the complex notes wash over their palates. Then their Adam’s apples bob slightly with the liquid’s descent.

“*And*…?” Will prompts with a signature sassy lift of his eyebrow.

Hannibal leans in to close the remaining inch between them. The moment their foreheads touch, he shuts his glistening eyes and releases a relieved, grateful sigh. Wine glasses forgotten, Hannibal clasps Will's warm, empty hands. Their fingers intertwine as he places a slow, deep kiss to Will's parted mouth.

And therein lies the same exquisite taste, still lingering on their tongues.

Hannibal's lips draw back into a sly, toothy smile.

As Will reflects him, he answers:

"*…It's bittersweet*."

Chapter End Notes

~~and a symphony~~

And so, that's how they survived…and learned to live and thrive along the way.

Enjoy the epilogue! ;)

Whimsy (Epilogue)

Chapter Notes

And in case you were wondering…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They're going to have to talk about it one of these days.

…one of these days when neither of them are grievously wounded, in a precarious state of mind, dead tired, or actively dodging bullets.

Not that Hannibal is unsatisfied with the current state of affairs—truly, he could not be happier to simply be alive in these very specific circumstances.

But true to his nature, he *is* curious.

And although their apparent mind-reading ability isn't *quite* yet infallible, he suspects that Will may be curious too.

Regardless of the outcome, it at least warrants a discussion.

And so, two weeks ago, Hannibal began to scheme.

Well, he could have just *asked.*

—but when did they ever handle things in a simple, sane, or purely logical way?

Furthermore, there was nothing *actually* immoral with what he was about to do.

It was only a little fun.

A conversation starter, so to speak.

Whimsy.

After his order arrived, effectively setting everything in stone, all that was left to do was write the message. Then he placed it inside, glided the tip of his tongue across the diagonal edges and, with an extremely self-satisfied smirk, sealed the small blue envelope.

Today is the day.

With the credit card-sized letter in hand, Hannibal sighs. The only downside is that he won't be present to witness the glorious initial reaction. But he hopes at least the gist of it will

reverberate down the corridors of their shared rooms.

He'll experience the aftermath soon enough.

Finally, he unlocks the latch and slides open the door.

Will, in brown loafers and a white polo shirt that's tucked into khaki knee-length shorts, is seated on the bed directly outside. To match his new identity, his beard is only slightly more grown out than usual, which hides the scar well, and his hair is parted to the right so that his bangs cover his other scar.

Instead of acknowledging Hannibal, his eyes remain on the burner phone in his hand. On the screen is a vertical video of a very familiar pack of dogs frolicking in a light dusting of snow. From the icons at the bottom, it seems to be some sort of social media post.

"Gonna tell me *why* you were writing in the bathroom?"

"For privacy," Hannibal remarks with a soft grin.

Will finally lowers the phone to give him a look of mock curiosity. Then his eyes flick to the envelope. "We having affairs already?"

"While that would certainly help throw off our hunters, there's no reason to go to such lengths." Hannibal smirks as he hands over the letter. "This is for you."

Just as Will's fingers are about to close over it, Hannibal withdraws his hand.

"But you must promise *not* to open it until seven o'clock."

Will narrows his eyes, irritated for falling for the oldest trick in the book. "*Why?*"

"Oh, believe me…" Hannibal says with a cheeky, knowing smile, barely containing himself. "It's for your own good." Then he holds out the letter once more.

With lightning fast reflexes, Will grabs it before he can be fooled again. Intrigued, he flips the thin letter a few times before reluctantly slipping it into his pants pocket.

They file into the living area. Early morning sun filters in through the tinted windows. But instead of the sea, their view is blocked by adjacent yachts on both sides.

Hannibal fetches his beige coat from the sofa and slips it over his shoulders. He's already donned in matching suit pants, a brown vest, red tie, and a pale blue dress shirt.

As if he's merely heading off to work, he picks up a brown leather briefcase and retrieves a Panama hat from the corner of a dining chair.

Unease building, Will trails after him onto the deck. At the stern, Hannibal sets down the briefcase to draw a pair of sunglasses from his coat pocket. But before he puts them on, he glances at Will. His eyes soften as empathy strikes him.

“Curious if we can survive separation,” Hannibal muses. “…for a mere twelve hours.”

Smirking dryly, Will glances away. “Well, *abandonment* requires expectation.”

Hannibal nods. “Nevertheless, we must have faith in our reunion. Trust in its inevitability.” After pushing the jet black sunglasses up the bridge of his nose, he observes Will standing unassisted with both hands in his pockets. “Your leg isn’t troubling you?”

Will shrugs, still avoiding eye contact. “Feels fine for now.”

“Well, be careful not to overstrain yourself. There’s no need to complete every item on your itinerary in one day. In fact, it would be far less conspicuous if you don’t.”

Will chuckles. At last, he lifts his head to face Hannibal. “I’m sorry, did I *really* just hear you say, ‘be careful’?”

Hannibal grins. “You did.”

The grating rumble of a motor dies down as a small boat drifts in. With expert precision, the man steering it eases to a stop at the stern of the yacht.

Hannibal picks up his briefcase. But instead of heading to the boat, he abruptly turns and wraps his free arm around Will.

Will flinches but instinctively hugs back.

Standing rigidly, he realizes that they’ve never embraced like *this* before.

Casually.

…like family saying goodbye at the airport.

And only for a short trip.

As if to drive the point home, Hannibal firmly pats the back of Will’s shoulders and pulls away with a fond smile. “I look forward to dinner.”

Will lifts an eyebrow. “Then it’s a date?”

“It can be.” With one last reassuring grin, Hannibal turns away and, with the grace of a dancer, hops onto the awaiting boat. After a courteous handshake, he exchanges a few phrases with the man, who nods and starts up the motor.

Only able to make out *buenos días* and c*ómo estás*, Will realizes that his grade school-level Spanish is going to need a *lot* of brushing up.

Then Hannibal glances back at Will. “And don’t forget,” he calls through the din as they depart, “not until *seven*!”

With an exasperated sigh, Will takes a few steps forward and watches the boat disappear down the bustling, congested harbor.

As the foamy wake dissipates in the tropical blue waters, Will stands alone.

—except, for the first time in a month, he couldn't be *less* alone.

All around him, people laugh and chat loudly among family, friends, and lovers. Locals and tourists joyously meet and mingle in a blend of Spanish, English, and a few other languages. Several young kids race around the deck of an adjacent yacht.

A little girl suddenly stops in her tracks. Ducking playfully beneath one of the railings, she waves at him. "Hello!"

Will grins shyly and, like how he once greeted a lost dog on a lonely road, says, "Hello."

With a giggle, the girl runs off and joins her family indoors.

And suddenly, Will realizes that he's "normal" again.

It's a fresh start.

A new life.

He's been reborn, yet he still retains all the precious memories of his past life.

Hand-in-hand with the one he loves most, they've made the jump to a new world.

Perhaps, in the end, this will only be a stay of execution. But borrowed time is still *time*.

And, for the first time in as long as he can remember, he looks forward to the future—not with dread, but with genuine, invigorating curiosity.

Hope and anticipation.

As the true golden hour nears its final minute, Will steps back into the living area. On the dining room table is a manilla envelope containing all of his flawlessly forged documents.

He smirks. Whoever made these must have fantastic dark web "Yelp" reviews.

He picks it up and fishes out the empty wallet from his pocket. Then he dumps out the envelope's contents and begins filling the billfold with some cash, a new ID, and matching credit cards.

Gil Cunningham is his new name.

Will grimaced when he first saw it printed on the cards.

In between double-checking all the documents and the quality of the forgeries, Hannibal gave him a look. “Is there a problem?”

Will sighed. “No, it’s just, uh…” he began wearily. “Well, don’t you think that’s a bit… *obvious*?”

“On the contrary,” Hannibal remarked, holding the pages of Gil’s passport to the light, “seeing as how every pun I ever said went unnoticed by the Head of the Behavioral Science Unit, no one is catching on anytime soon.”

Will chuckled. “Well, Alana will probably figure it out eventually. If she wasn’t listening in at the time, then I’m sure she has a recording of that conversation.”

“We shall see.” Hannibal smirked as he closed the window shades. Then he fetched a UV flashlight and switched it on over the passport and IDs. An array of stunningly intricate designs appeared under the purple glow. “In any event, these names are more for our sake than anything else. For one, they’re easy to remember, especially in a pinch.”

Will nodded, begrudgingly conceding. He could still easily recall “Bill Grant” and “Liam Graves.”

Even “Phil Lam.”

“They’re not meant to be permanent, of course,” Hannibal explained. “But we’ll likely retain these identities for the remainder of our time here, however long that may be.”

Arms crossed, Will huffed. “Well, I’ll keep that in mind…”

Grinning, Hannibal briefly licked his lips as he turned away to gather the documents. “Please do.”

Just as Will, now sporting a pair of aviators and with a lightweight backpack slung over his left shoulder, is about to step out onto the deck, he pauses.

Hannibal didn’t mention what restaurant they’re supposed to meet at. He didn’t even tell Will his new name.

Strange.

It’s not like him to forget such crucial details. Will did, but his mind was occupied with figuring out which mechanic he could pay to discreetly get his ring cut off, among other things like reserving his hotel room, purchasing necessities, scoping out a more permanent living situation, and commencing his hunt for Bedelia.

He does have the number of Hannibal’s burner phone memorized, but Hannibal strictly and emphatically warned that it should only be used in a life-or-death emergency.

So Will’s hand happens to slip into his pocket.

He eyes the tantalizing blue envelope.

Technically, he didn't agree to the promise.

As if Hannibal could jump out at any moment, Will quickly glances around. But he's definitely alone.

Still, he sets down his backpack and walks over to a corner. He even locks himself in his memory palace broom closet. Away from any windows and potential prying eyes—both physically and mentally—Will carefully unseals the letter.

Inside is a single rectangular piece of white cardstock paper.

"La Guarida — 7:30" reads the immaculate flowing calligraphy, despite being written with a ballpoint pen. At least the ink didn't smear this time.

Will grins. Of course Hannibal wouldn't forget. But he wonders what the hell all the fuss was about.

Then he flips to the back.

Yours truly,

Lester Hancock

Chapter End Notes

Yep, he never forgot!

"Hello, *Lester*…"

“Mr. Cunningham, are we already on a *first* name basis?”

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